

# The Science of a Meaningful Life

Emiliana Simon-Thomas, PhD  
Science Director



*Jenn Liv*



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# Does a Meaningful Life = Happiness?

*“...the purpose of life is not to be happy at all. It is to be useful, to be honorable. It is to be compassionate. It is to matter, to have it make some difference that you lived.”*

(Leo Rosten, 1963)

Leading a happy life, the psychologists found, is associated with being a *taker* while leading a meaningful life corresponds with being a *giver*.”

(The Atlantic, 2013)

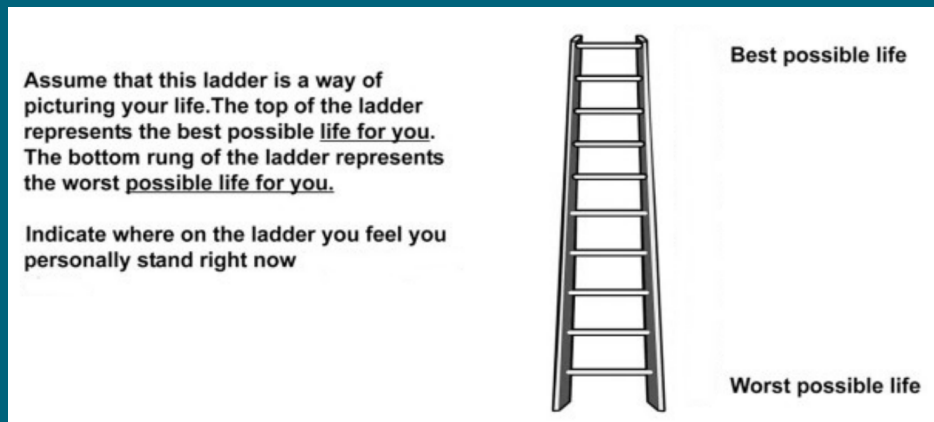
# Actually, both kinds of happiness matter...

Hedonic happiness: Pleasant and unpleasant experiences, e.g. enjoyment vs. distress, access to vs. impoverishment of resources and opportunities, etc..

Eudemonic happiness: Your ability to pursue goals, feeling that what you do is worthwhile, and sense of purpose in life.

# And there's a third kind...

Evaluative happiness: Satisfaction with life



## ...and none of these work well alone



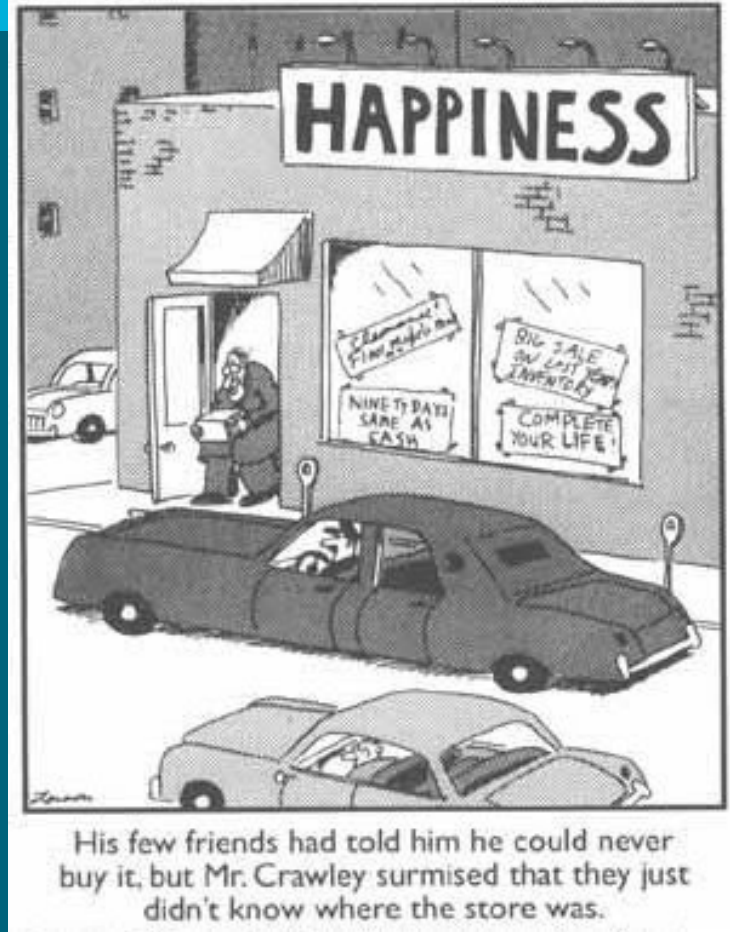
# A Scientific Perspective on Happiness

“...the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile.”

(Lyubomirsky, 2007)

a.k.a. well-being, flourishing, thriving, “the good life”

While we're pretty good at hedonic and evaluative happiness, there's more to learn about eudaimonia – that is - how to prioritize, strengthen, and sustain eudemonia



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# Happiness Poll:

Please go to:

[www.menti.com](https://www.menti.com) and  
use the code 3361 4800

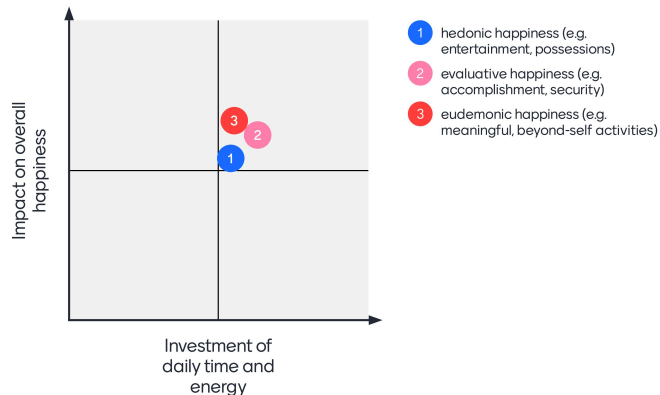
OR

scan the QR code ->



In your own life, where would you place each happiness type in terms of how much time and energy you invest and impact on your overall happiness?

Mentimeter



1/77



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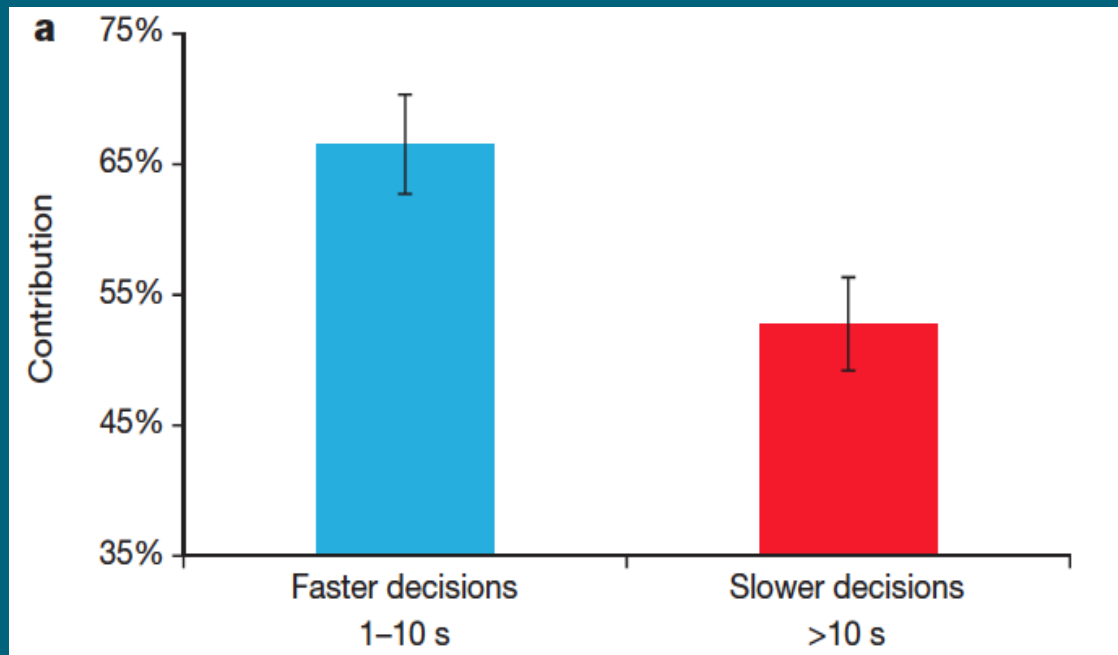
# Where Does Meaning Come From?

- Our prosocial instinct (e.g. nurturance, care-giving, consolation, forming and maintaining lifelong social bonds)



# Where Does Meaning Come From?

- Our ultra sociality as a species (i.e. evolutionary advantages of altruism, coordinated effort, and cooperation)



(Rand & Greene 2012)

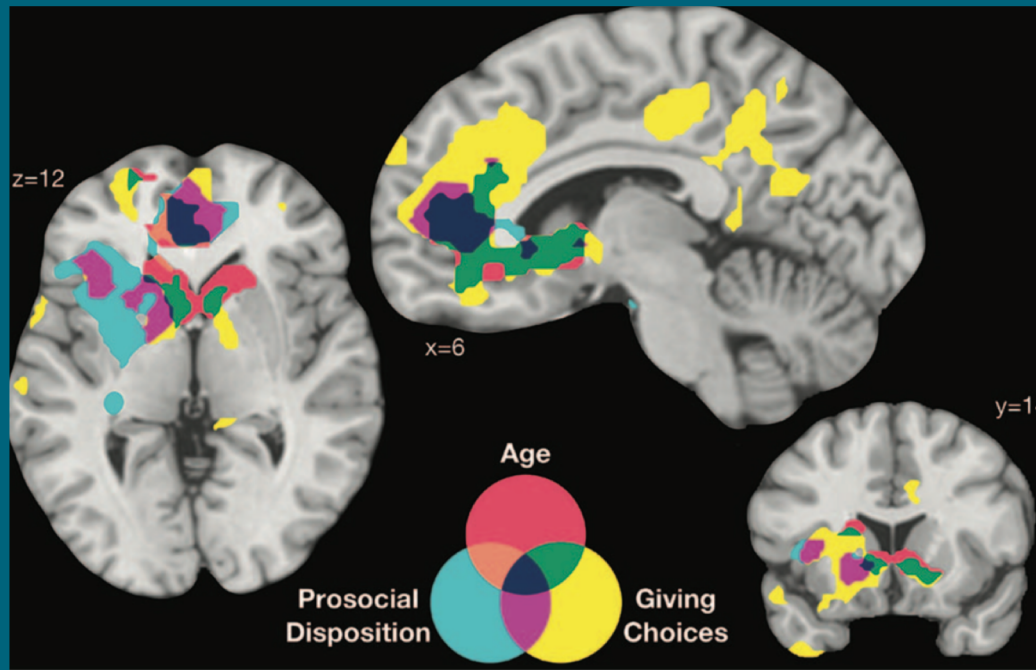


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# Is Meaning Biological?

- The sustained reward value of generosity
- “Tend and Befriend” systems in the brain, e.g. attachment, empathy, compassion, and gratitude



(Hubbard et. al., 2016)

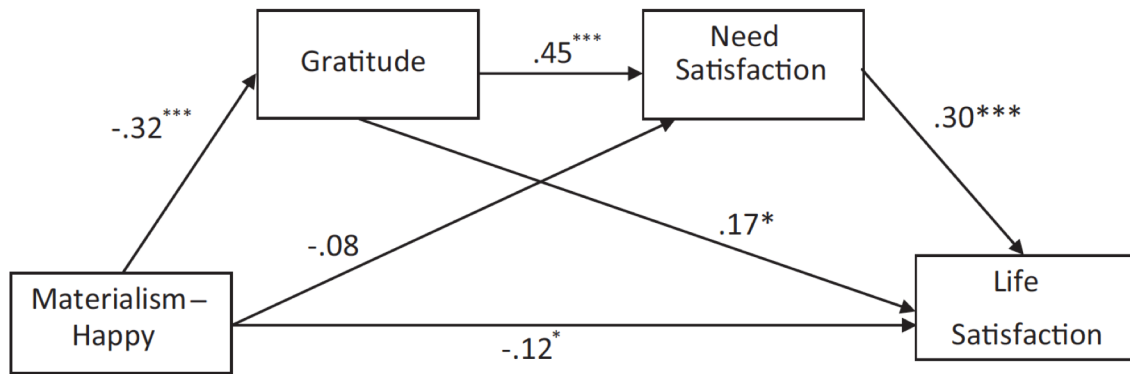


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# Myths about Meaning

We'll feel it – it will just emerge without explicit effort – we only need to direct effort towards meeting material goals

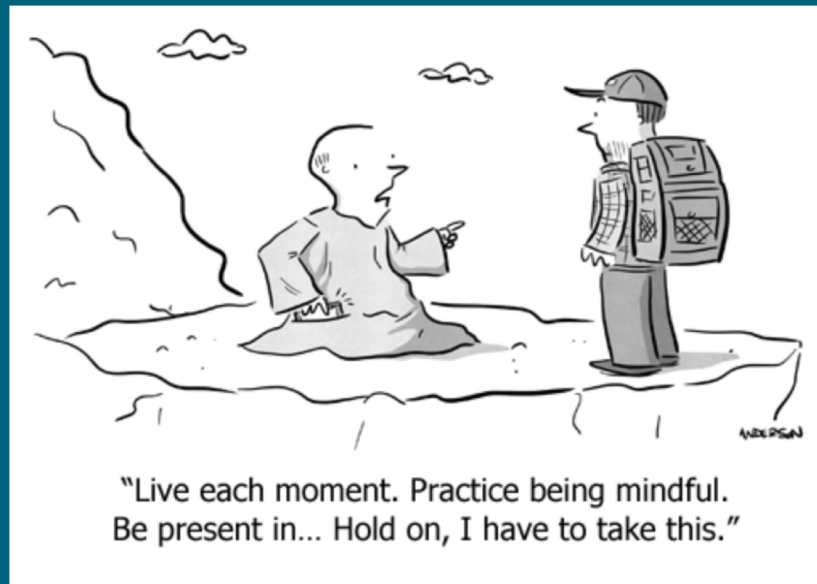


**Fig. 2.** Mediation analysis of the links between materialism and life satisfaction.

(Tsang, 2014)

# Barriers to Finding Meaning

- Popular media/norms
- Negatively-biased, self-focused cognitive illusions
- Perceived ineffectiveness, lack of impact or progress
- Excessively transactional climate
- Time famine/persistent distraction







The infographic features a central light blue circle with the text "8 Tips for a Meaningful Life". Surrounding this central circle are eight smaller circles, each containing a tip. The tips are arranged in a ring, alternating between orange and pink colors. The tips are: Optimism (teal), Mindfulness (orange), Connect (pink), Gratitude (teal), Compassion (orange), Kindness (teal), Play (pink), and Awe (orange).

## 8 Tips for a Meaningful Life

**Optimism:**  
Think  
positively

**Mindfulness:**  
Agile,  
friendly  
attention

**Connect:**  
Engage &  
foster  
friendship

**Gratitude:**  
Savor &  
say "thank  
you"

**Compassion:**  
Extend care  
& help

**Kindness:**  
Give,  
share &  
cooperate

**Play:** Just  
for fun!

**Awe:**  
Elevate &  
inspire

# Levity, Awe, & Optimism

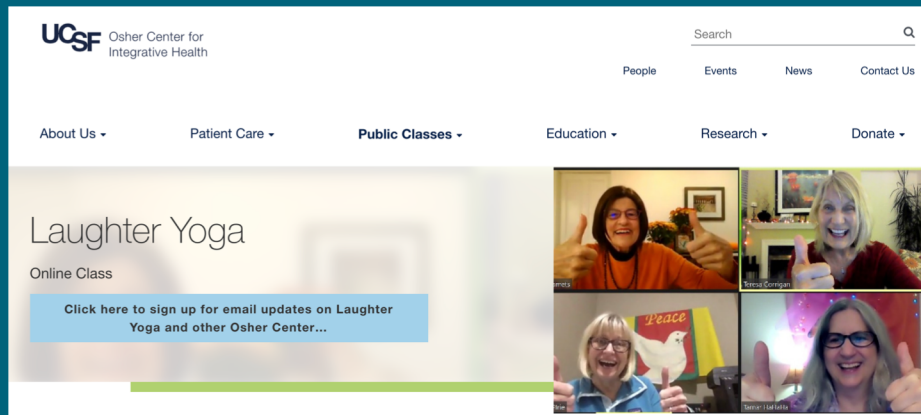
## Prioritizing, savoring, and enhancing what *is* good

### 1. Choose shared experiences over things

- Laughter and play
- Biophilia, awe and the sublime

### 2. Growth mindset

- Three Good Things/Small Wins
- Best Possible Self
- Finding silver linings



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# Let's Try One Together

Post in chat your most recent jaw-dropping, tingly, deeply inspiring experience.

\*Awe = the experience of being in the presence of something extraordinary that does not fit well into your typical mode of thinking and understanding.



# How Do We Know This Works?

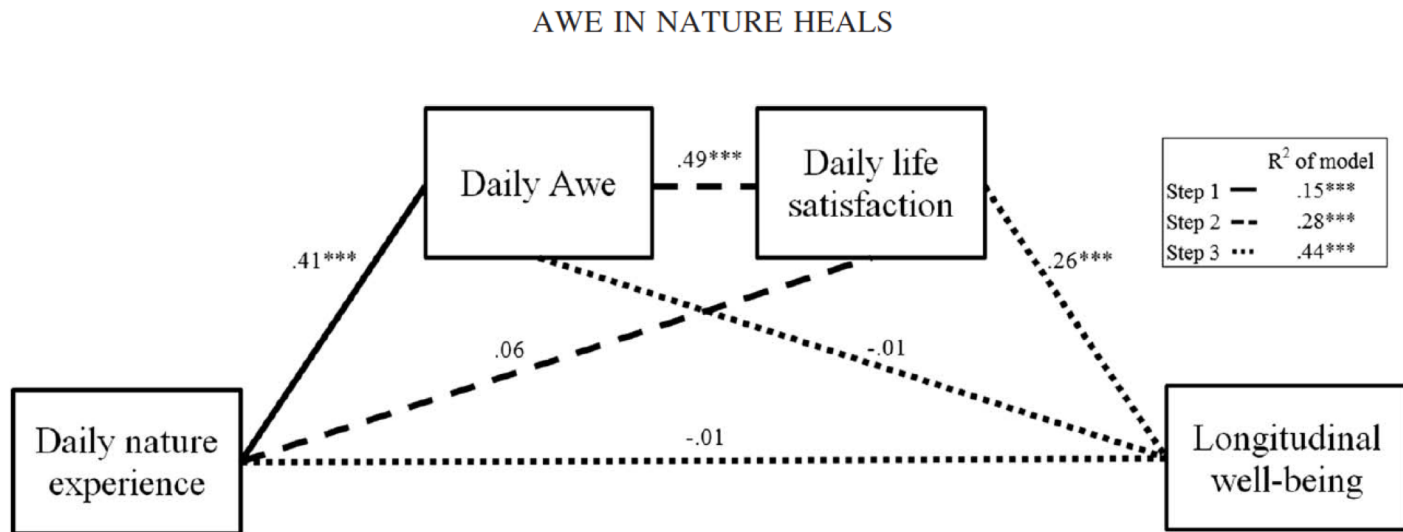


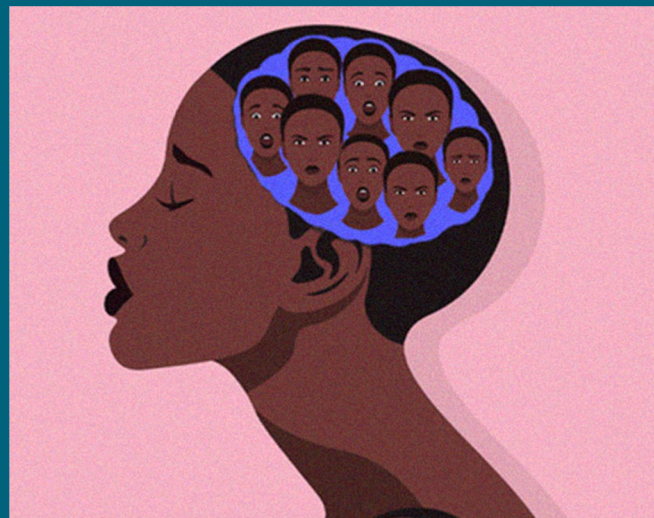
Figure 3. Study 2 sequential mediation model. Distinct line styles represent different steps in the model. Numbers above lines are unstandardized coefficients of that path. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

(Anderson, 2018)

# Mindfulness & Compassion

Observing our mental experiences and surroundings in a real-time, friendly and open-hearted way; the genuine urge to help

1. Inner awareness practices, e.g. mindfulness, contemplative practice, centering prayer, yoga
2. Labelling, disclosing, and self-distancing emotions
3. Reframing from “threat” to “challenge” mindset; “fixed” to “growth” mindset
4. Common humanity; 360° compassion



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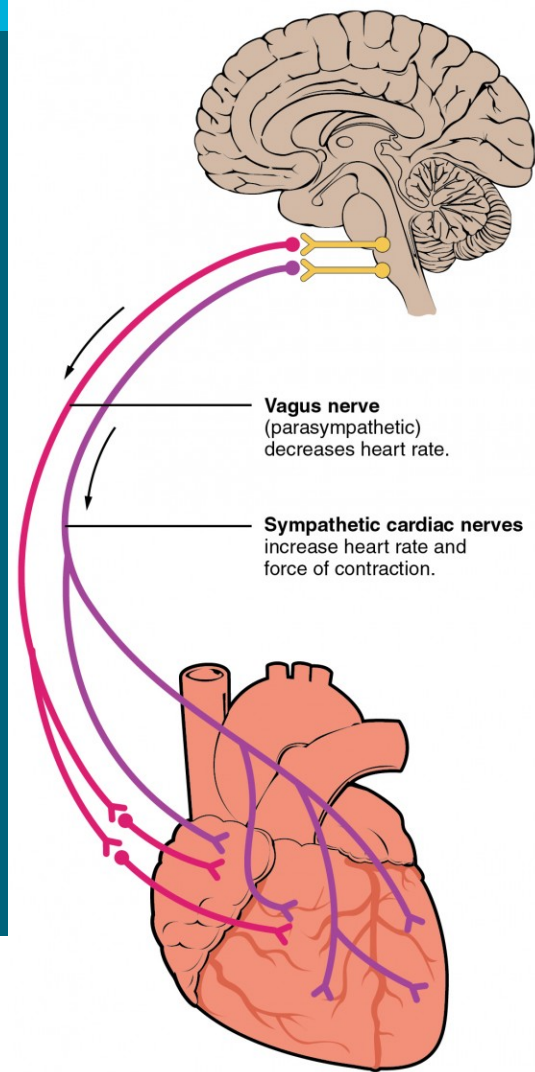
# Let's Try Another

## Micro-mindfulness: restorative breath

- Inhale deeply, exhale more slowly than you inhaled, and pause briefly before each next inhale.

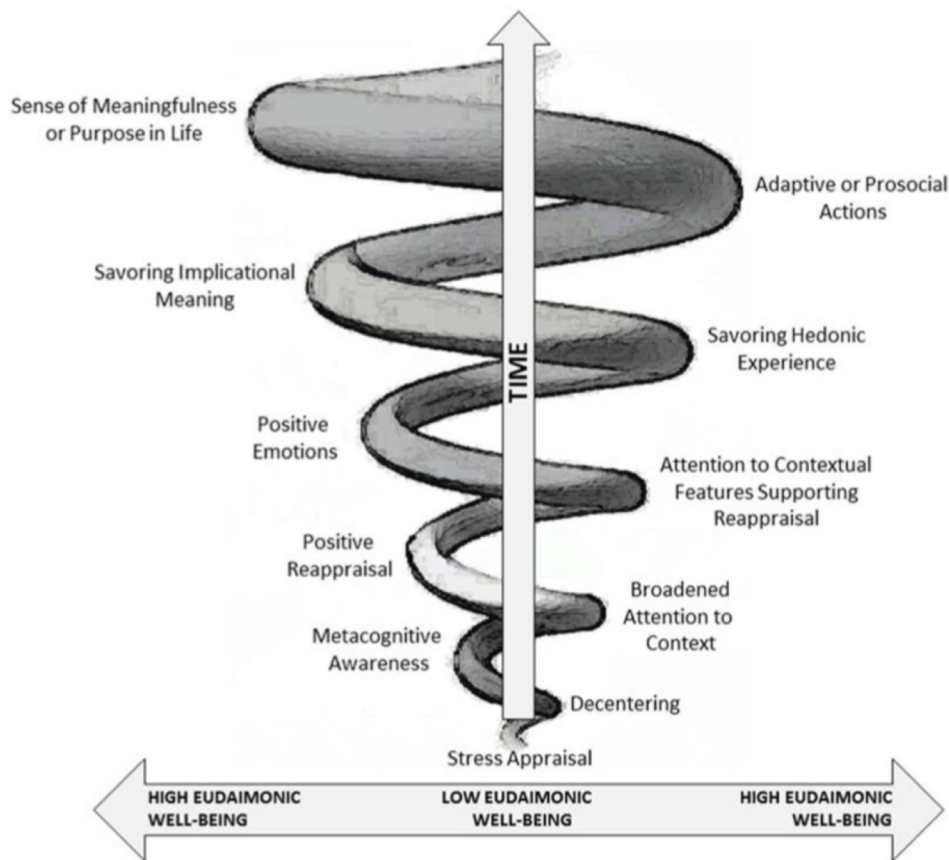


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# How Do We Know This Works?

(Garland et. al., 2015)



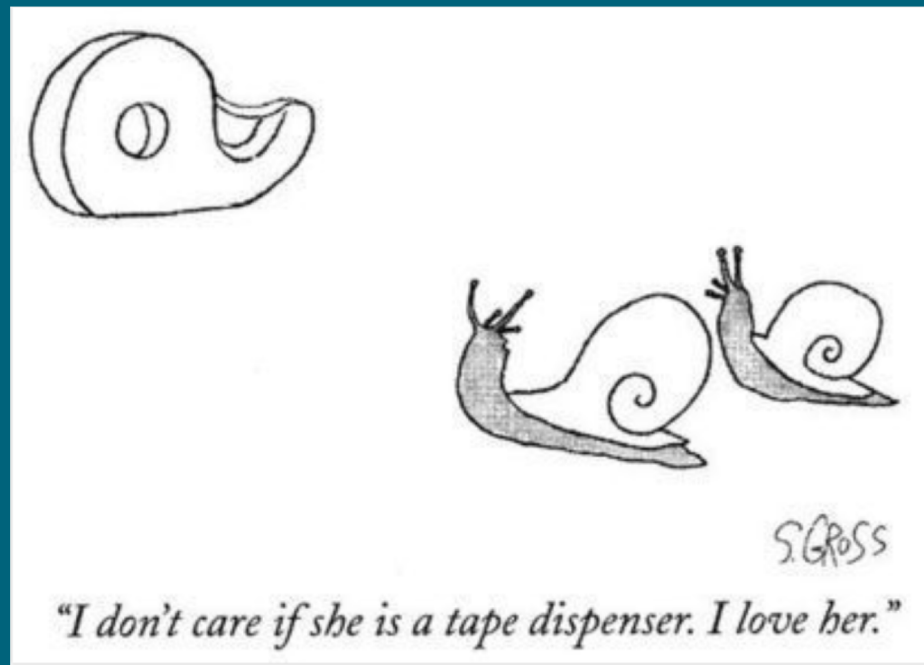
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# Connection, Gratitude, & Generosity

Count on people, and take heart that they count on you

1. Small talk, Capitalize on positive events
2. Gratitude 1,2,3
3. Ask for, and accept help
4. Revel in the warm glow
5. Apologize & Forgive



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# Let's Try One More

## Write a Gratitude Letter

- Go to THIS LINK :  
<https://forms.gle/JWpSmFVAkWZ4Umg>  
a7

A draft of your letter will be emailed to the address that you provided!



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### Gratitude Letter Practice

This is an exercise in drafting a gratitude letter that you can share!

esimonthomas@berkeley.edu [Switch account](#)



\* Required

Email \*

Your email

Your First and Last Name \*

Your answer

Next

Clear form

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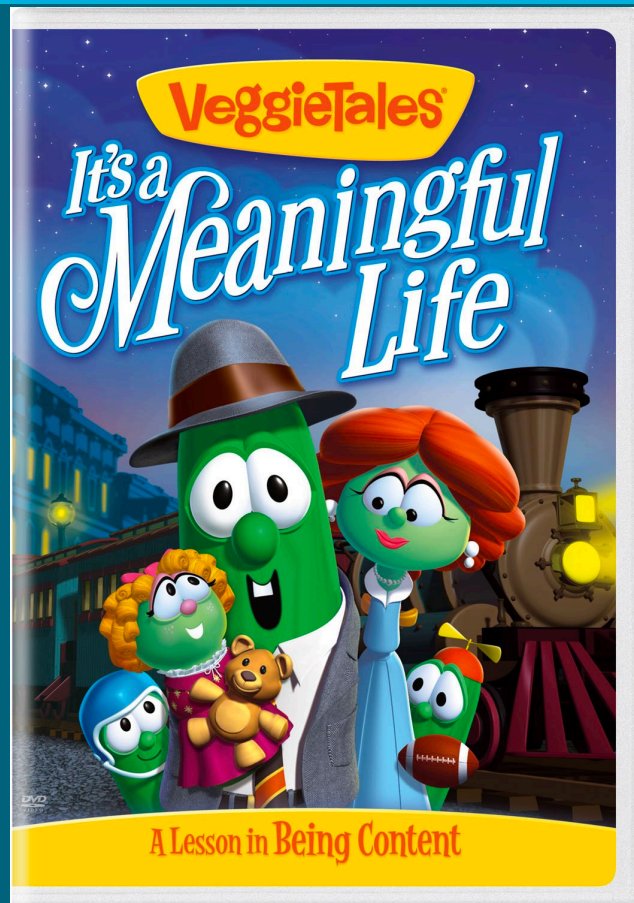
# How Do We Know This Works?

Increased	Decreased
Positive emotions	Physical discomfort and disease
<b>Optimism, hope, and meaning</b>	Chronic and post traumatic stress
Happiness and life satisfaction	Anxiety
<b>Perseverance and goal attainment</b>	Depression
Spiritual transcendence	Envy
<b>Prosocial appraisals, motivation, and behavior</b>	Entitlement and possessiveness
Support seeking	Incivility and aggression
Social appeal	
Friendship, and relationship quality, satisfaction, and endurance	
Leadership endorsement and success	

# In Closing

## A Meaningful Life

- Is broad, psychologically rich, and transcends self-interest
- Is beneficial to health, well-being, and behavior
- Is malleable, and within reach
- Can be enhanced with intentional activities, exercises, and practices that are backed by science



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# Q&A



# Resources

## Websites

1. [greatergood.berkeley.edu](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu)
2. [ggsc.berkeley.edu](http://ggsc.berkeley.edu)
3. [ggia.berkeley.edu](http://ggia.berkeley.edu)
4. [ggie.berkeley.edu](http://ggie.berkeley.edu)
5. [thnx4.org](http://thnx4.org)
6. The Science of Happiness podcast (@ iTunes)

## Online Courses on **edX.org**:

1. The Science of Happiness
2. Foundations of Happiness at Work
3. Mindfulness and Resilience to Stress at Work
4. Empathy and Emotional Intelligence at Work



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THANK YOU!