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**Also by Tal Ben-Shahar**

*The Pursuit of Perfect*

*To my family*

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## **Preface**

**We all live with the objective of being happy; our lives are all different and yet the same.**

— *Anne Frank*

I Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment first taught a positive psychology seminar at Harvard in 2002. Eight students signed up; two dropped out. In class each week, we explored what I believed to be *the question of questions*: how can we help ourselves and others—individuals, communities, and society—become happier? We read academic journal articles, tested ideas, shared personal stories, experienced frustration as well

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as delight, and, by the end of the year, emerged with a clearer understanding of what psychology can teach us about leading happier, more fulfilling lives.

The following year the class went public, in a manner of speaking. My mentor Philip Stone, who first introduced me to the field and was also the first professor to teach positive psychology at Harvard, encouraged me to offer a lecture course on the topic. Three hundred eighty students signed up. In their year-end evaluations, more than 20 percent noted that "the course improves the quality of one's life." The next time I offered the course, 855 students enrolled, making it the largest class at the university.

William James, who over a century ago founded American psychology, kept me on track by reminding me to remain practical and seek "truth's cash-value in experiential terms." The cash-value that I primarily sought for the students was not in hard currency or the currency of success and accolades but rather in what I've come to call the ultimate currency, the end toward which all other ends lead: happiness.

This was not merely a class on the theory of happiness. Students, beyond reading articles and learning about the research in the field, were asked to apply the material. They wrote papers in which they grappled with their fears and reflected on their strengths, set ambitious goals for the week and for the coming decade; they were encouraged to take risks and find their stretch zone (the healthy median between their comfort and panic zones).

Personally, I was not always able to find that healthy median. As a shy introvert, I felt fairly comfortable the first time I taught the class with six students. Lecturing in front of close to four hundred students the following year, however, was certainly a stretch for me. When the class more than doubled in the third year, I was firmly in the panic zone—especially once students' parents, a handful of grandparents, and then the media started to show up.

Since the day that the *Harvard Crimson* and then the *Boston Globe* reported on the popularity of the class, the deluge of questions hasn't stopped. People are sensing—have been sensing for a while—that we are in the midst of some sort of revolution, and they are not sure why. How can you explain the demand for positive psychology at Harvard and on other college campuses? Why this growing interest in the study of happiness, in elementary and high schools, as well as among the adult population? Is it because people are more depressed today? Is it something about a twentyfirst-century education or our Western way of life?

In fact, the study of happiness is unique neither to our hemisphere nor to our postmodern age. People everywhere, and always, have sought the key to happiness. Plato institutionalized the study of the good life in his Academy, while his star student, Aristotle, opened the competing Lyceum to promote his own take on the study of happiness.

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on flourishing. More than a century earlier, and on another continent, Confucius walked from village to village to share his prescription for fulfillment. No great religion or comprehensive philosophical system is indifferent to the question of happiness, whether in this world or in the afterlife. More recently, self-help gurus have occupied large parts of bookstores and conference centers around the world—from India to Indiana, from Jerusalem to Jeddah.

But while interest in, and study of, the good life transcends time and place, there are some unique aspects in our age that help explain the high demand for positive psychology. In the United States, rates of depression are ten times higher today than they were in the 1960s, and the average age for the onset of depression is fourteen and a half compared to twenty-nine and a half in 1960. A study conducted in American colleges tells us that nearly 45 percent of students were "so depressed that they had difficulty functioning." Other countries are following in the footsteps of the United States. In 1957, 52 percent in Britain said that they were very happy, compared to 36 percent in 2005—despite the fact that the British have tripled their wealth over the last half century. With the rapid growth in the Chinese economy comes a rapid growth in the number of adults and children who experience anxiety and depression. According to the Chinese Health Ministry, "The mental health status of our country's children and youths is indeed worrying."

While levels of material prosperity are on the rise, so are levels of depression. Even though our generation—in most Western countries as well as in an increasing number of places in the East—is wealthier than previous generations, we are not happier for it. A leading scholar in the field of positive psychology, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, asks a simple question with a complex answer: "If we are so rich, why aren't we happy?"

As long as people believed that their basic material needs had to be met in order for them to lead a fulfilling life, it was easy to explain away unhappiness. But now, with the basic needs of many having been met, there is no longer a ready-made justification for discontent. More and more people are looking to resolve the paradox—that money seems to have bought us unhappiness—and they are turning to positive psychology for help.

## **Why Positive Psychology?**

Positive psychology—generally referred to as "the scientific study of optimal human functioning"<sup>1</sup>—was officially launched as a field of study in 1998 by Martin Seligman, president of the American Psychological Association. Until that year, the study of happiness—of enhancing the quality of our lives—had largely been dominated by pop psychology. In the multitude of self-help seminars and books, there is much fun and charisma, and yet many (though far from all) offer little substance. They promise five easy steps to happiness, the three secrets of success,

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and four ways to find your perfect lover. These are usually empty promises, and over the years, people have become cynical about self-help.

On the other side we have academe, with writing and research that are substantive but that do not find their way into most households. As I see it, the role of positive psychology is to bridge the ivory tower and Main Street, the rigor of academe and the fun of the self-help movement. That, too, is the purpose of this book.

Many self-help books overpromise and underdeliver, because few of them are subjected to the test of the scientific method. In contrast, ideas that have appeared in academic journals and have passed the academic process from conception to publication usually have *Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment* much more substance. While their authors are generally less grandiose, making fewer promises to fewer readers, these authors also *Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment* tend to deliver on their promises.

## **Happier Learn The Secrets To Daily Joy And Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment Lasting Fulfillment**

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