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*The **Science** Of Happiness*

Barbara Fredrickson On Cultivating Positive Emotions

ANGELA WINTER

Most scientists who study emotions

focus on negative states: depression, anxiety, fear. Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson has spent more than twenty years investigating the relatively uncharted terrain of positive emotions, which she says can make us healthier and happier if we take time to cultivate them.

Fredrickson's findings are the subject of her new book, Positivity (Crown). Though its title might make it sound like a self-help bestseller, the book doesn't belong in the pop-psychology section, and Fredrickson is no Pollyanna telling us to put on a smile before leaving the house each morning. Negative emotions, she says, are necessary for us to flourish, and positive emotions are by nature subtle and fleeting; the secret is not to deny their transience but to find ways to increase their quantity. Rather than trying to eliminate negativity, she recommends we balance negative feelings with positive ones. Below a certain ratio of positive to negative, Fredrickson says, people get pulled into downward spirals, their behavior becomes rigid and predictable, and they begin to feel burdened and lifeless.

Fredrickson, who's forty-four, was born and raised in the Midwest and comes from, in her words, "a long line of stoics" who didn't discuss or reveal their emotions. When she was growing up, emotional expression — positive and negative — was discouraged. She says, "The implicit message from family members was 'You should have known how I was feeling by the look on my face.' Yet the looks on their faces hardly ever changed!" The suppression of emotions at home motivated her escape into the life of the mind, and she focused on her academic studies.

After receiving her bachelor's degree from Carleton College in Minnesota, Fredrickson moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, where she received her PhD from Stanford University and did her postdoctoral work at the University of California at Berkeley. She began studying positive emotions because there was so little research on them, she says. A good friend in graduate school once joked that Fredrickson studied emotions because she didn't have any. Fredrickson acknowledges the joke's kernel of truth: she's spent much of her adulthood becoming fluent in the emotions that were left unspoken in her childhood. She exemplifies the adage that we teach best what we most need to learn.

Fredrickson has been on the faculty of Duke University and the University of Michigan and is currently the Kenan Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She also serves as director and principal investigator of the university's Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Lab. Fredrickson's research has been featured in the New York Times Magazine and on CNN and PBS. Her theory of how positive emotions have functioned in human evolution was recognized with the 2000 American Psychological

Association's Templeton Prize in Positive Psychology. Since then, she has traveled extensively as an international expert on positive emotions, and in 2008 she received the Society for Experimental Social Psychology's Career Trajectory Award.

Fredrickson and I arranged to meet for this interview at a restaurant we both enjoy in Carrboro, North Carolina. The owners graciously allowed us to come in before they opened for the day so we could have a quiet spot to talk. Fredrickson arrived dressed smartly in black with a Parisian scarf around her neck, and we settled into a booth to discuss the benefits of increasing positive emotions in our lives. The name of the restaurant, appropriately enough, is GlassHalFull.

Winter: How do you define "positive emotions?"

Fredrickson: If we look at a whole range of positive emotions — from amusement, to awe, to interest, to gratitude, to inspiration — what they all have in common is that they are reactions to your current circumstances. They aren't a permanent state; they're feelings that come and go. That's true of all emotions, but positive emotions tend to be more fleeting.

They are also what I would call "wantable" states. They not only feel good, but we *want* to feel them. Some people might say it feels good to be angry, and anger can sometimes be useful or productive, but people don't *want* to feel angry. Positive emotions have a kind of alluring glitter dust on them. You want to rearrange your day to get more of those sparkling moments.

Even so, people do differ in how much they actively seek out positive emotions. One of my aims in writing my book was to increase readers' appreciation and respect for positive emotions so they could perhaps reap the benefits of positive emotions more fully.

Winter: You make a distinction between pleasures and positive emotions. How are they different?

Fredrickson: When I began my work, many scientists lumped pleasure and positive emotions together and concluded that both signal us to go forward as opposed to pull back. I agree that positive emotions have that go-forward quality, but I've argued for separating the two psychological states. Positive emotions are triggered by our interpretations of our current circumstances, whereas pleasure is what we get when we give the body what it needs *right now*. If you're thirsty, water tastes really good; if you're cold, it feels good to wrap your coat around you. Pleasures tell us what the body needs. Positive emotions tell us not just what the body needs but what we need mentally and emotionally and what our future selves might need. They help us broaden our minds and our outlook and build our resources down the road. I call it the "broaden-and-build" effect.

Winter: What about happiness? Is it a positive emotion?

Fredrickson: Scientists most often measure happiness by asking how strongly a person agrees with statements like “I’m satisfied with my life” or “If I could live my life over, I wouldn’t change a thing.” These kinds of questions are much broader in scope than questions that are used to measure positive emotions, such as “Are you feeling amused, silly, or lighthearted?” Positive emotions are much more narrow-band feelings, not overall judgments about your life. Sometimes we use *happy* to refer to a specific emotion, but, scientifically speaking, it’s not OK to use a single word, like *happy*, in multiple ways. I view happiness as the overall outcome of many positive moments.

My goal as a scientist has always been to pull apart the process of how one state leads to another and ultimately guides us to a useful outcome. Over the last decade researchers have found some stunning correlations between expressing more positive emotions and living longer. My role is to ask, How does that happen? How do you go from experiencing these pleasant momentary states to living longer — perhaps even ten years longer?

Other researchers have found that the number of positive emotions a person feels predicts his or her satisfaction with life. What we’ve done is uncover how positive emotions actually *cause* us to be happier by helping us build our resources for managing day-to-day life. When we have better resources, we emerge from adverse situations feeling more satisfied with the outcome.

My colleagues and I have a paper forthcoming in the journal *Emotion* called “Happiness Unpacked.” We’re trying to take this word *happiness*, which is a little bit of a garbage-can term — people put too many things in it — and look under the hood at the dynamics of the process. And what we’ve found is that we should be focusing on how we feel from day to day, not on how we can become happy with life in general. If you focus on day-to-day feelings, you end up building your resources and becoming your best version of yourself. Down the road, you’ll be happier with life. Rather than staring down happiness as our goal and asking ourselves, “How do I get there?” we should be thinking about how to create positive emotions in the moment.

Winter: Aren’t there cultural differences in which emotions we define as “positive?”

Fredrickson: Yes, what have been studied the most are differences between East Asian and Western populations. The typical finding is that Westerners (Americans and Canadians, mostly) feel positive emotions when they do something that sets them apart; they feel pride in their accomplishments. East Asians more often feel positive emotions in situations that connect them to another person. Those are just general trends,



BARBARA FREDRICKSON

however. Within each culture there’s a lot of variance.

I would argue, too, that how much people appreciate positive emotions differs from culture to culture. Latin cultures, for example, celebrate positive emotions more and have more passions built into the culture. In the U.S. I think that our focus on productivity, outcome, and achievement helps blind us to positive emotions.

But positive emotions seem to function the same way in all cultures. For example, we’ve created a study examining how positive emotions help people feel “at one” with another person. We have people think about their best friends and then look at a series of images showing two circles. First the circles overlap a little bit, then a little bit

more, and a little bit more. We ask the research participants to select the pair of circles that depict how they feel about their best friend. Then we cause the participants to experience some positive emotions and have them fill out a similar survey, which includes more items so that they can’t remember which circles they chose the first time. When we ask how they feel about their best friends now, people pick circles that overlap more, indicating more of this feeling of oneness. We’ve been able to replicate those results in India and Japan, as well.

Winter: Is that a typical example of the type of research that you do?

Fredrickson: We do lots of different studies. I like to follow the ideas rather than stick to one particular method. In the early days more of our research was physiological: we were looking at blood pressure, heart rate, and so on. In another series of studies we trained people in lovingkindness meditation, which focuses on creating more feelings of warmth and kindness toward others. You’re first asked to think of someone in your life for whom you have warm and tender feelings, whether it’s a child or a spouse or even a pet, and then to try to bring forth those feelings as much as you can and hold them in your heart. As you’re doing that, you let the child or pet or person you were thinking about kind of slip away, but you hold on to the feeling. Then you take that warm, tender feeling and apply it to yourself or to others whom you might not normally feel that way about. And you continue to apply that feeling to ever larger circles of people.

We had a study come out in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in November 2008 called “Open Hearts Build Lives.” We looked at the effects of lovingkindness meditation on people’s resources. We gave the research participants a survey to take stock of their personality traits, health, and social ties at the start of the study, then randomly assigned them either to learn lovingkindness meditation or not. All of them tracked their emotions daily for two months, and then, a few weeks after the meditation workshops had ended, we measured those same traits again.

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