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PERSONAL GOALS, LIFE MEANING, AND VIRTUE: WELLSPRINGS OF A POSITIVE LIFE

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Nothing is so insufferable to man as to be completely at rest, without passions, without business, without diversion, without effort. Then he feels his nothingness, his forlornness, his insufficiency, his weakness, his emptiness. (Pascal, *The Pensees*, 1660/1950, p. 57).

As far as we know humans are the only meaning-seeking species on the planet. Meaning-making is an activity that is distinctly human, a function of how the human brain is organized. The many ways in which humans conceptualize, create, and search for meaning has become a recent focus of behavioral science research on quality of life and subjective well-being. This chapter will review the recent literature on meaning-making in the context of personal goals and life purpose. My intention will be to document how meaningful living, expressed as the pursuit of personally significant goals, contributes to positive experience and to a positive life.

THE CENTRALITY OF GOALS IN HUMAN FUNCTIONING

Since the mid-1980s, considerable progress has been made in understanding how goals contribute to long-term levels of well-being. Goals have been identified as key integrative and analytic units in the study of human

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motivation (see Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Karoly, 1999, for reviews). The driving concern has been to understand how personal goals are related to long-term levels of happiness and life satisfaction and how ultimately to use this knowledge in a way that might optimize human well-being. How do goals contribute to living the positive life? Of all of the goals that people strive for, which really matter? Which goals most provide a sense of meaning and purpose? Which goals are worth living for and possibly worth dying for?

Goal attainment is a major benchmark for the experience of well-being. When asked what makes for a happy, fulfilling, and meaningful life, people spontaneously discuss their life goals, wishes, and dreams for the future. For many people, of course, the primary goal in life is to be happy. Yet research indicates that happiness is most often a by-product of participating in worthwhile projects and activities that do not have as their primary focus the attainment of happiness. Whether they focus primarily on basic research or intervention, psychologists also see goal-striving as vital to “the good life.” Psychological well-being has been defined as “the self-evaluated level of the person’s competence and the self, weighted in terms of the person’s hierarchy of goals” (Lawton, 1996, p. 328). Frisch (1998) defined happiness as “the extent to which important goals, needs, and wishes have been fulfilled” (p. 35). Along with researchers, therapists are increasingly advocating a motivational analysis of life trajectories. For example, quality of life therapy (Frisch, 1998) advocates the importance of revising goals, standards, and priorities as a strategy for boosting life happiness and satisfaction. Similarly, the development of goals that allow for a greater sense of purpose of life is one of the cornerstones of well-being therapy (Fava, 1999), meaning-centered counseling (Wong, 1998), and goal-focused group psychotherapy (Klausner et al., 1998).

People spend significant amounts of their daily lives reflecting on, deciding between, and pursuing personally important and meaningful goals, goals that lend order and structure to these lives. Without goals, life would lack structure and purpose. Goals, according to Klinger (1998), serve as “the linchpin of psychological organization” (p. 44). As internal representations of desired outcomes, they determine the contents of consciousness. Most thoughts and accompanying emotional states are determined by goals. Klinger (1998) has demonstrated that our preoccupations and the emotions we feel are tied to the nature of our goals and the status of these pursuits. Further, because quality of life is determined by the contents of consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), goal striving should be at the forefront of a science of positive psychology. Goals are the concretized expression of future orientation and life purpose, and provide a convenient and powerful metric for examining these vital elements of a positive life. Examples of personal goals are shown in Exhibit 5.1.

EXHIBIT 5.1

Examples of Personal Strivings

“Avoid letting anything upset me.”
“Work toward higher athletic capabilities.”
“Meet new people through my present friends.”
“Promote happiness and hope to others.”
“Accept others as they are.”
“Be myself and not do things to please others.”
“Not eat between meals to lose weight.”
“Not be a materialistic person.”
“Appear intelligent to others.”
“Always be thankful, no matter what the circumstances.”
“Reciprocate kindnesses.”
“Keep my beagles happy and healthy.”
“Do what is pleasing to God.”

GOALS AND LIFE MEANING

Goals are essential components of a person’s experience of his or her life as meaningful and contribute to the process by which people construe their lives as meaningful or worthwhile. For example, a generative goal to “teach my son to make a difference in his community” lends meaning and direction to the role of parenthood. The goals construct has given form and substance to the amorphous concept of “meaning in life” that humanistic psychology has long understood as a key element of human functioning. Some have argued that the construct of “meaning” *has no meaning* outside of a person’s goals and purposes—that is, what a person is trying to do. Goals are signals that orient a person to what is valuable, meaningful, and purposeful. This is not to say, however, that all goals provide meaning or even contribute to a sense of meaning. Many goals are trivial or shallow and, although necessary for daily functioning, have little capacity to contribute to a sense that life is meaningful. Psychologists are beginning to warm to the concept of personal meaning (Wong & Fry, 1998) and are gradually recognizing that despite its somewhat vague and boundless nature, the topic can be seriously and fruitfully investigated (Debats, 1996; Ryff, 1989; Wong & Fry, 1998). The scientific and clinical relevance of the personal meaning construct has been demonstrated in the adjustment literature, in which indicators of meaningfulness (e.g., purpose in life, a sense of coherence) predict positive functioning (French & Joseph, 1999; Robak & Griffin, 2000), whereas indicators of meaninglessness (e.g., anomie, alienation) are regularly associated with psychological distress and pathology (Baumeister, 1991; Keyes, 1998; Seeman, 1991).

Recent empirical research has demonstrated that a strong sense of meaning is associated with life satisfaction and happiness, and a lack of

meaning is predictive of depression and disengagement (Reker & Wong, 1988; Wong & Fry, 1998). Meaning is conceptualized in most research as a relatively independent component of well-being, and researchers have recently advocated including it in conceptual models of well-being, quality of life, and personal growth (Compton, Smith, Cornish, & Qualls, 1996; Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Consensus is emerging on what can be considered to be a taxonomy of meaning. Table 5.1 shows the major categories of life meaning that have emerged across three different research programs on personal meaning. What is impressive is that these studies have used diverse methodologies (including rating scales, surveys, and interviews) in heterogeneous populations. The four life meaning categories of achievements/work, relationships/intimacy, religion/spirituality, and self-transcendence/generativity appear to encompass most of the domains in which people strive for a sense of meaning. Achievement/work includes being committed to one's work, believing in its worth, and liking challenge. Relationships/intimacy includes relating well to others, trusting others, and being altruistic and helpful. Religion/spirituality includes having a personal relationship with God, believing in an afterlife, and contributing to a faith community. Transcendence/generativity encompasses contributing to society, leaving a legacy, and transcending self-interests. What makes this finding of the robustness of these meaning factors especially impressive is that these studies have used diverse methodologies (including rating scales, surveys, and interviews) in heterogeneous populations. For example, the personal strivings methodology (Emmons, 1999) uses a semiprojective sentence-completion task; the Personal Meaning Profile developed by Wong (1998) resembles Q-sort items; and Ebersole (1998) used narrative methodology to ask people to write about the central personal meaning in their life.

The science of personality has converged on a Big 5 (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) taxonomy of personality traits (John & Srivastava, 1999); perhaps the personal meaning literature will eventually embrace a "Big 4" taxonomy of personal meaning dimensions (WIST; work, intimacy, spirituality, and transcendence). Such

TABLE 5.1
A Consensual Taxonomy of Life Meaning

Ebersole (1998)	Emmons (1999)	Wong (1998)
Life narratives	Personal strivings	Personal meaning profile
Life work	Achievement	Achievement
Relationships	Intimacy	Relationship
Religious beliefs	Religion/spirituality	Religion
Service	Generativity	Self-transcendence

convergence is likely to yield assessment and intervention dividends. For example, assessment instruments designed to measure life meaning must capture, at a minimum, the WIST categories of meaningful experience. Clinicians might routinely assess a client's level of satisfaction with WIST, design interventions to assist clients in developing sources of fulfillment within these broad life domains, and offer motivational restructuring emphasizing these domains when lives are lacking in meaningful pursuits.

Beyond identifying these motivational clusters, more specific questions can be asked. Are there certain types of goals that are consistently linked with happiness? Does the way in which people strive for their goals—for example by framing the goal in abstract or concrete terms or using approach versus avoidance language—affect the experience of subjective well-being (SWB)? Do the goals need to be integrated into a more or less coherent package where conflict is minimized for maximal positive well-being? What advice could be given to persons so that they might extract more pleasure from their goal pursuits? These are questions toward which the remainder of the chapter is directed.

SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AND THE POSITIVE LIFE

Before examining the contribution that goals make to the positive life, we must first consider how the positive life has been measured in goals research. In a series of articles and columns initiating the science of “positive psychology,” Seligman (1998, 1999; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) has begun to sketch the scaffold of a comprehensive taxonomy of human strength and civic virtues. Three broad domains, or “pillars,” are (a) positive subjective experience, (b) positive personal and interpersonal traits, and (c) positive institutions and communities. Positive subjective experiences include the intrapsychic states of happiness and life satisfaction, flow, contentment, optimism, and hope. SWB is generally defined as an individual's cognitive evaluation of life, the presence of positive or pleasant emotions, and the absence of negative or unpleasant emotions (Oishi, Deiner, Suh, & Lucas, 1999). Pleasant emotions include happiness, joy, contentment, and elation; unpleasant emotions include sadness, anxiety, depression, and anger (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). The cognitive component of SWB, life satisfaction, is measured most commonly through the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), a brief but highly reliable global evaluation of one's life as a whole. Widely used in both clinical and nonclinical samples, evidence for the reliability and validity of the SWLS is available in Pavot and Diener (1993). Various other trait-like indexes of positive well-being, including measures of vitality, self-

actualization, self-esteem, and openness to experience, have been used in goals research (e.g., Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996).

GOAL CONTENT: THE “WHAT” OF GOAL STRIVING

When it comes to contributing to the good life, experience, common sense, and research tell us that not all goals are created equally. People strive for diverse ends in their goal pursuits, and not all ends are equally likely to contribute to well-being. In a systematic review of the literature on personality and well-being, DeNeve and Cooper (1998) speculate that personality traits determine the types of goals toward which individuals strive, with goal-striving having a more direct link to SWB than do personality traits. Coding personal goals into broad, thematic clusters enables the examination of the relationship between the ends that people strive for and their well-being independently of outcome or other goal-striving processes. We have developed a coding system for classifying personal strivings into 12 thematic content categories (Emmons, 1999, app. B). Three types of goal strivings consistently relate to SWB: intimacy, generativity, and spirituality. These three goal types correspond to three of the four major categories of personal meaning from Table 5.1. Definitions and examples of each of these categories of goal striving are shown in Exhibit 5.2.

EXHIBIT 5.2 Goal Themes Associated With Well-Being

Intimacy

Goals that express a desire for close, reciprocal relationships. (E.g., “Help my friends and let them know I care,” “Accept others as they are,” “Try to be a good listener.”)

Spirituality

Goals that are oriented to transcending the self. (E.g., “Deepen my relationship with God,” “Learn to tune into higher power throughout the day,” “Appreciate God’s creations.”)

Generativity

A commitment and concern for future generations. (E.g., “Be a good role model for my siblings,” “Feel useful to society,” “Do volunteer work that enhances educational opportunities for children.”)

Power

Goals that express a desire to influence and affect others. (E.g., “Force men to be intimate,” “Be the best when with a group of people,” “Get others to see my point of view.”)

In both community and college student samples, we have found that the presence of intimacy strivings, generativity strivings, and spiritual strivings within a person's goal hierarchy predict greater SWB, particularly higher positive affect. Conversely, power strivings tend to be associated with lower levels of SWB (Emmons, 1991), especially with higher levels of negative affect. In each case, we examine the proportion of striving in that category relative to the total number of strivings generated. This provides a rough index of the centrality of each motivational theme within the person's overall goal hierarchy. Power and intimacy strivings reflect the broader motivational orientations of agency and communion. Intimacy strivings reflect a concern for establishing deep and mutually gratifying relationships, whereas power strivings reflect a desire to influence others and have impact on them. The ability to engage in close intimate relationships based on trust and affection is the hallmark of psychosocial maturity and a key component to psychological growth (Ryff, 1989). Empirical research has documented the powerful effect of attachments on health and well-being (see Myers, 2000, for a review). On the other hand, persons who are primarily power-oriented and who possess many agentic strivings—to impress or control others—appear to be at risk for lower well-being and poorer physical health. In a recent study examining social motives and distress in gay men differing in HIV status, power strivings were positively related to distress scores (a composite of anxiety and depression) in HIV-positive men (Igreja, Zuroff, Koestner, & Saltaris, 2000). The authors of this study suggest that the ability to control and influence others is highly threatened by their physical state, and this leads to increased distress. Conversely, intimacy strivings were found to buffer HIV-positive individuals against distress by increasing the perceived availability of social support. Individuals high in power strivings may also be committing their lives primarily to obtaining extrinsic sources of satisfaction such as materialistic goals that fail to meet the basic needs for relatedness and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Generativity strivings, defined as those strivings that involve creating, giving of oneself to others, and having an influence on future generations (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992) also seem to result in higher levels of life satisfaction and positive affect (Ackerman, Zuroff, & Moskowitz, 2000). Generativity is a concern for guiding and promoting the next generation through parenting, as well as through teaching, mentoring, counseling, leadership, and generating products that will survive the self and contribute positively to the next generation. Generativity is manifested both privately and publicly as an inner desire whose realization may promote healthy development and psychological and physical well-being. From a societal perspective, generativity is a valuable resource that “may undergird social institutions, encourage citizen's contributions and commitments to the public good, motivate efforts to sustain continuity from one generation to the

next, and initiate social change” (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1998, p. 3). Although generativity is a concern for promoting the well-being of later generations, there is an immediate positive impact on the promoter’s *own* well-being. In a stratified sample of young, mid-life, and older adults, McAdams, de St. Aubin, and Logan (1993) found that generative concern was related to both greater reported happiness and life satisfaction; and Keyes and Ryff (1998) found that higher levels of generative motives, behaviors, and traits each contributed to heightened levels of psychological and social well-being in a nationally representative sample. Although mid-life adults in their study showed the highest levels of generativity, there was no age-cohort effect for generativity on happiness and satisfaction, suggesting that its tie to well-being is not age-specific. Generative concerns most likely contribute to well-being by fostering behaviors and commitments that create and sustain positive interpersonal and transgenerational relationships (Ackerman et al., 2000).

Spiritual strivings refer to goals that are oriented around the sacred. They are those personal goals that are concerned with ultimate purpose, ethics, commitment to a higher power, and a seeking of the divine in daily experience. This conception of spirituality is consistent with a number of theorists who, while acknowledging the diversity of meaning, affirm as a common core meaning of spirituality/religion that of the recognition of a transcendent, meta-empirical dimension of reality and the desire to establish a relationship with that reality. The scientific study of spirituality, long taboo in the behavioral sciences, is beginning to open up new vistas for understanding personal meaning, goal-striving, and subjective well-being. Given the prevalence of religion in society, it would be surprising if spiritual and religious concerns did not find expression in one form or another through personal goals. In our research, people differ in their tendency to attribute spiritual significance to their strivings, with percentages of spiritual strivings ranging from zero to nearly 50%, depending on the nature of the sample studied. College males have the lowest level of avowed spiritual strivings, whereas elderly, church-going females tend to have the highest levels. Spiritual strivings are related to higher levels of SWB, especially to greater positive affect and to both marital and overall life satisfaction (Emmons, Cheung, & Tehrani, 1998). In the Emmons et al. (1998) study, these relations were stronger for women than for men, in accord with the literature on gender differences in religion and SWB. Spiritual strivings were also rated as more important, requiring more effort, and engaged in for more intrinsic reasons than were nonspiritual strivings. Investing goals with a sense of sacredness confers on them a power to organize experience and to promote well-being that is absent in nonsacred strivings (Mahoney et al., 1999).

Taken together, then, the findings on goal content and well-being indicate that when it comes to the positive life, not all goals are created equally (Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996). Rather, certain clusters of goals consistently tend to foster higher levels of well-being than other types of goals. Intimacy, generativity, and spirituality are intrinsically rewarding domains of goal activity that render lives meaningful and purposeful, particularly compared to power strivings or strivings for self-sufficiency. Tillich (1951) spoke of “existential disappointment,” which he saw as the result of giving ultimate concern to that which is merely transitory and temporal. Each of these three goal types reflects an active engagement with the world, a sense of connectedness to others, to the future, to the transcendent, and thus contain a glimpse of eternity. Spirituality has been virtually ignored in contemporary models of motivation and well-being (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000), yet there are compelling empirical and theoretical reasons for its inclusion in any comprehensive account of human well-being (Emmons, 1999; Piedmont, 1999).

INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC GOAL ORIENTATIONS

Another fruitful research program has demonstrated that the relative importance of different types of goals within a person’s overall goal hierarchy profoundly affects well-being. Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996) have distinguished between goals that serve intrinsic needs and goals that are extrinsic in that they serve other, less inherently satisfying needs. These researchers have demonstrated that the rated importance of the extrinsic goals of financial success, social recognition, and physical attractiveness were negatively related to several measures of well-being, including vitality and self-actualization. In addition, in Kasser and Ryan (1996), the rated importance of these extrinsic goals was positively associated with measures of anxiety, depression, narcissism, and physical illness symptomatology. Alternatively, research participants who possessed the intrinsic goals of personal growth and community contribution reported higher levels of SWB. The authors concluded that there is a “dark side to the American dream”—that a relative emphasis on fame, fortune, and success to the neglect of intrinsically meaningful goals is likely to lead to psychological and interpersonal problems. An overvaluation of materialistic pursuits detracts from the “good life” in at least two domains: positive subjective experience and fulfilling interpersonal relationships. Other studies have demonstrated that income is moderately correlated with well-being, from which it has been argued that increases in income beyond a base level fail to improve well-being (Myers, 2000).

The link between extrinsic goals and lower SWB appears to hold even when the current perceived attainment of these goals is high (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). Sheldon and Kasser showed in a 12-week study that goal attainment toward intrinsic goals enhanced well-being, whereas progress toward extrinsic goals was unrelated to well-being. A related finding, reported by Brunstein, Schultheiss, and Graessman (1998), is that progress toward motive-congruent goals predicts SWB, but commitment toward motive-incongruent goals detracts from SWB. When it comes to psychological well-being, what people are striving for—the content of their aims and ambitions—does matter. Not all goals *are* created equal, and not all goal attainment is equally healthy. At first glance, this observation might seem blatantly obvious, yet goal theories of affect have been known to indiscriminately equate goal attainment with positive affective outcomes, regardless of goal content (Locke & Kristof, 1996).

In a recent, important cross-cultural replication and extension of the research by Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996), Ryan and colleagues (1999) found that lower self-esteem, lower self-actualization, and lower life satisfaction were each associated with a greater investment in extrinsic goals in Russian college students. Furthermore, the perceived likelihood of attaining extrinsic and intrinsic aspirations was also associated with well-being in the predicted direction: Attainment of intrinsic goals facilitated well-being, whereas attaining extrinsic goals had no effect on well-being. This study is notable in that it points to potential culturally invariant relationships between patterns of goal striving and well-being. A commitment to extrinsic, materialistic goals, even when these goals are attainable, detracts from overall well-being. On the other hand, a commitment to intrinsic goals appears to favor well-being even in countries newly exposed to market economies. These results remind us that culture plays a formative role in the development of striving systems and that people's life goals reflect, to a certain degree, the economic and cultural systems within which they are embedded.

The influence of materialistic goals on well-being was also examined by Diener and Fujita (1995), who proposed that personal strivings mediate the relationship between resources and well-being. They hypothesized that resources such as money, good looks, health, and intelligence should be related to well-being *only* to the extent to which these resources enable the individual's personal strivings. Research participants rated the relevance of each of 21 resources for the attainment of each of their strivings. Significant correlations were found between the goal relevance of resources and negative affect and life satisfaction; higher correlations were also observed between goal-relevant resources and SWB than between less relevant resources and well-being. In other words, they found evidence for an interaction between material resources and well-being. The possession of resources per se, inde-

pendent of goal strivings, was unrelated to well-being. Thus, the greater the congruence between a person's goals and his or her resources, the higher the well-being. Strivings mediated the relationship between resources and well-being. It is interesting to note that consistent with the research of Kasser and Ryan cited earlier, the "intrinsic" resources of self-confidence, social skills, and self-discipline received the highest relevance ratings, whereas the "extrinsic" resources of material possessions, physical attractiveness, and money were rated as mostly irrelevant to the attainment of one's goals. Both studies seriously question that the proverbial "American Dream" of fame, fortune, and image is a desirable state of affairs toward which to strive. Yet the latter class of goals remains a powerful draw in the lives of many despite their inability to provide lasting satisfaction. This suggests that either people's implicit theories of the types of outcomes that will lead to happiness is wrong, or that anticipated happiness and satisfaction are not the primary motivations for establishing and pursuing goals. Whether or not these relationships would hold for less educated samples or for people in dire financial situations remains to be seen. A recent study found that experimentally activating feelings of anxiety led research participants to increase their estimate of their future earnings and the amount of money they would spend on possessions, suggesting that certain aspects of low emotional well-being might drive materialistic goal pursuits (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000).

GOAL ORIENTATION: THE "HOW" OF GOAL-STRIVING

The second way in which personal goals are related to SWB is through goal orientation. Goal orientation refers to individual differences in the manner in which goals are represented consciously by the individual and described linguistically when communicating these goals to others. Thus, orientation refers to individual differences in the mental representations of goals. Although it might be argued that this distinction is purely a semantic one, with no practical significance, it does appear that there are psychological benefits (and conversely, psychological costs) associated with different forms of goal framing.

One goal orientation that appears to have important consequences for SWB is the degree to which individuals are striving for positive, desirable goals as opposed to striving to avoid negative, aversive goals (Cochran & Tesser, 1996; Elliott & Sheldon, 1998; Elliott, Sheldon, & Church, 1997; Emmons & Kaiser, 1996). The distinction between approach and avoidance is fundamental and basic to the study of human behavior and motivation. The difference between these two orientations is whether positive or negative outcomes are used as a benchmark for self-regulatory activity. Approach

goals are positive incentives to be sought after and moved toward whereas avoidant goals are negative consequences to be avoided or prevented. For instance, a person may be trying to “spend time with others” versus “avoid being lonely,” or “trying to avoid letting anything upset me” versus “trying to stay calm even under trying circumstances,” “trying to contribute to the field of positive psychology” versus “trying to avoid focusing on remedial psychology.” On average, between 10 and 20% of a person’s goals tend to be avoidance goals (Emmons, 1999). A number of studies have now documented that avoidant striving is associated with less positive psychological outcomes as compared to approach striving (see Emmons, 1999, chap. 3, for a review).

Emmons and Kaiser (1996) found that individuals whose striving lists contain a large number of avoidant strivings experienced more psychological distress, particularly anxiety, than individuals with predominantly appetitive striving systems. Negative or inhibitory strivings appears to be a risk factor for psychological and physical distress, although in some cases they may lead to more effective self-regulation (Cochran & Tesser, 1996). Elliot et al. (1997) found that the pursuit of avoidance goals over time was negatively associated with SWB, as measured by affect and life satisfaction ratings. Moreover, mediational analyses revealed that the link between avoidance striving and SWB was mediated through perceived progress, with avoidance striving relating to less perceived progress. Elliot, Chirkov, Kim, and Sheldon (2001) extended this line of research cross-culturally. They found that avoidance goals negatively predicted subjective well-being in individualistic countries but not in collectivist countries.

Additional evidence suggests that avoidant goals may play a role in interpersonal as well as intrapersonal satisfaction. In a sample of married couples (King & Emmons, 1991), marital satisfaction was significantly negatively related to the proportion of the spouse’s avoidant strivings. A person is likely to be less satisfied with his or her marriage if his or her spouse is predominantly concerned with avoiding negative outcomes. Thus, avoidant striving appears to exact an interpersonal as well as an intrapersonal toll on well-being.

There is also evidence that avoidance striving is related to poorer perceptions of physical health. Elliott and Sheldon (1998) found that avoidance personal goals are associated with both retrospective reports of physical symptomatology and an increase in symptoms over time. Rather than rely on expert coding, participants in this study classified their own goals by selecting whether each goal represented attaining a positive outcome (e.g., “to excel in my workplace”) versus a focus on avoiding a negative outcome (e.g., “to avoid excessive partying”). Pursuing negative, avoidant goals was associated with experiencing more physical health complaints over time. Mediational analyses revealed that perceived progress, controlledness, and

autonomy mediated the relationship between avoidant striving and subsequent ill health. In other words, participants who pursued a greater number of avoidance goals were less likely to attain those goals and felt a greater sense of external pressure to achieve them. Although not all avoidance goals may be inherently harmful, in general avoidance goals must be considered a psychological vulnerability that places individuals at risk for emotional and physical ill-being. Elliot and Sheldon (1998) concluded that “personal goals represent, in essence, the vehicles through which individuals negotiate their daily lives . . . some vehicles (approach goals) are better suited to the terrain of everyday life than others (avoidance goals)” (p. 1294).

PERSONAL GOALS IN THE LIVES OF PERSONS WITH NEUROMUSCULAR DISEASE

Having documented that there are substantial and replicable relationships between individual variations in people’s goals and indicators of SWB in healthy populations, an important practical question becomes, Can the study of goal-striving within particular health populations be informative for understanding how goals contribute to well-being? Goals and goal-system variables have been used in several lines of research to examine positive and negative functioning within clinical health populations. Goal variables have been identified as a key determinant of both health promotion and health endangerment (Ewart, 1991; Karoly, 1991) and have been linked to conditions as diverse as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, alcohol and tobacco abuse, chronic pain, and hypochondriasis. For example, Affleck et al. (1998) found that perceived progress toward personal goals attenuated the effect of pain on well-being in women with fibromyalgia. Women who reported more progress toward their goals on a given day experienced an increase in emotional well-being for that day that was independent of pain or fatigue levels. Thus, a personal-goals approach has potential to lead to new insights into understanding the effects of chronic illness on emotional and psychological well-being.

We have recently begun a project to examine how a personal-goals perspective can be applied to understanding issues related to the quality of life and SWB of people with post-polio syndrome (PPS). PPS is a neuromuscular disease (NMD), which as a broader category includes more than 200 diseases that affect the neuromuscular organ system. NMDs are estimated to affect approximately four million people in the United States (National Institute of Health, 1998). PPS is a condition that can strike polio survivors anywhere from 10 to 40 years after recovery from an initial attack of the poliomyelitis virus. It is characterized by an additional weakening of muscles that were previously injured by polio infection. Symptoms include fatigue, slowly

progressive muscle weakness, muscle and joint pain, and muscular atrophy. Some patients experience only minor symptoms, and others develop spinal muscular atrophy or what appears to be, but is not, a form of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. PPS is rarely life-threatening. PPS is a very slowly progressing condition marked by long periods of stability and an unpredictable course.

Few studies have systematically examined what determines the quality of life of individuals with neuromuscular disease. Objective indicators such as functional ability in daily living, occupational status, and social activities are typically the focus of rehabilitation specialists. These indexes, however, fail to account for much variance in SWB (Abresch, Seyden, & Wineinger, 1998). By assisting people in their identification of their current priorities and commitments, by examining the sense of meaning and purpose goals provide as well as their manageability, stressfulness, and support, a personal-goals approach serves to examine what is possible and desirable to obtain. Framing subjective quality of life outcomes such as personal well-being in terms of goals may lead to new possibilities for understanding adaptation to physical disabilities.

With this rationale in mind, we administered a lengthy survey consisting of the Personal Strivings Assessment Packet (Emmons, 1999), measures of SWB, health status, functional ability, and a variety of other variables relevant to quality of life to 54 individuals with PPS. Participants were located through the University of California, Davis, Medical Center Neuromuscular Disease Clinic. Because of the special needs of this population with respect to achieving integration into their communities, specific measures were created to assess the degree to which their personal goals enabled them to feel connected to and integrated into their communities. We wanted to see if this goal-based measure explained more variance in SWB than standard questionnaire measures of community integration (Willer, Ottenbacher, & Coad, 1994). We also examined other social-ecological goal variables, including the degree to which others are aware of the striving (visibility), the degree to which others are supportive of the striving (support), the degree to which others hinder the striving (hindrance), and the degree to which the striving causes strain or tension in everyday interactions (strain).

Regression analyses indicated that the goal-based measure of integration was the strongest predictor of overall levels of well-being (a composite of life satisfaction, positive affect, and vitality) of any of the goal variables. Community integration through goals, perceived meaningfulness, and low goal difficulty were the strongest predictors of life satisfaction. Goal meaningfulness and low goal difficulty were the strongest predictors of positive affect. In other words, as goals increase in meaningfulness and attainability, persons

with PPS feel more satisfied with their lives. A goal-based measure of spirituality (self-ratings of the degree to which the goal brings the person closer to God) was positively associated with life satisfaction and positive affect. The degree to which pain interfered with the person's ability to work toward his or her goals was predictive of psychological distress (negative affect), as was the amount of interpersonal strain perceived by the person to be caused by the striving. In contrast, a global rating of pain was unrelated to well-being, suggesting that the goal-relevant pain measure is a more sensitive indicator of quality of life than is a global rating of overall degree of pain. Overall, the goal variables accounted for 39 to 44 percent of the variance in SWB ratings. This finding dovetails with the study by Affleck et al. (1998), who found that goal pursuit is a key motivational-cognitive construct for chronic pain in patients with fibromyalgia. It is interesting to note that in their study, effort toward health and fitness goals was not diminished on days with increasing pain, but effort and progress toward interpersonal goals was, indicating that pain does not affect all goals equally.

The personal strivings of two of the participants in our study are shown in Exhibit 5.3. These two individuals were also the highest (top half of the exhibit) and lowest (bottom half of the exhibit) in the sample in terms of overall life satisfaction. Given the relationship between investment in certain goal domains and SWB described earlier, it is apparent why these two people differ in life satisfaction. Themes of spirituality and intimacy are prevalent in the first person's list, whereas the second person is bereft of these self-transcendent strivings. By contrast, the second individual is characterized by a preponderance of negative, avoidant strivings, focused largely on emotional management and minimizing impact on others. It is interesting to note that the two were not different on a questionnaire measure of functional independence, suggesting that differences in SWB are not a result of differences in physical status.

These results, taken as a whole, suggest that a goal-based approach to community integration is viable and invites further exploration into the role of personal goals as workable clinical units of analysis for understanding the quality of life in the lives of persons with post-polio disease. Improving the quality of life of persons with neuromuscular disease has always been a goal of rehabilitation medicine (Abresch et al., 1998). Yet little information has been provided regarding what factors are critical to achieving a high quality of life. Facilitating the patient's identification of personally meaningful, attainable strivings and developing workable strategies for their accomplishment becomes a priority for rehabilitation providers, enabling the person to "live happily and productively on the same level as their neighbors" (Abresch et al., 1998, p. 233).

EXHIBIT 5.3
Personal Goals of Individuals High and Low in Life Satisfaction,
Postpolio Study

High life satisfaction:

Live my life at all times for God.
Watch what I say, so I don't hurt someone.
Help people that need help.
Pray for people I don't know, when I'm asked.
Thank God for everything on earth and sea.
Try to make people forget their problems.
Give a happy call to make someone happy.
Even though I'm in a wheelchair, show people it does not get me down.
Teach crafts to people.
Have fun and enjoy life because God gave me this life.

Low life satisfaction:

Communicate with my children.
Not be a burden to my family.
Help my children.
Not be a complainer.
Maintain my friendships.
Not depend too much on others.
Be as independent as possible.
Be well-informed.
Think positive thoughts.
Not get down in the dumps.
Keep a smile on my face.
Not overeat.

VIRTUE AND GOAL STRIVING: INTERNAL MECHANISMS
FOR GOAL SUCCESS

As vital as goals are for leading a positive life, they are not the entire story. Even meaningful and manageable goals, as important as those two components are, do not guarantee optimal life management. Psychologists have tended to focus on the psychological structures and processes that underlie goal striving. Self-regulatory strategies and plans have been among the favorite units of analysis for goals researchers (see, e.g., Cantor & Zirkel, 1990, for a comprehensive review). Undoubtedly cognitive strategies are important regulators of successful goal pursuit, yet they may not be enough for understanding the many ways in which goals contribute to positive life functioning. An approach that identifies the cognitive virtues that enable a person to effectively pursue conduct directed toward higher purposes and goals might be a productive approach to take.

To move toward a comprehensive formulation of the positive person and the good life in terms of goals, I would argue that we must look to the virtues underlying goal striving. Virtues are essential person characteristics

that can differentiate successful from unsuccessful goal strivers. Virtues are acquired excellences in character traits, the possession of which contributes to a person's completeness or wholeness (Zagzebski, 1996). Several theorists have brought the ancient Greek notion of *arête* into the 21st century, defining virtues as any psychological process that consistently enables a person to think and act so as to yield benefits for him- or herself and society (McCullough & Snyder, 2000, p. 3). Although a good many worthy virtues have been identified over the centuries, let me close this chapter by suggesting the relevance of the following trio for goal striving: prudence, patience, and perseverance. Each of these reflects a disposition that can counsel goal-directed action. Each of these is involved in self-regulation, which involves setting appropriate goals and persisting in the face of setbacks and failure (Baumeister, Leith, Muraven, & Bratslavsky, 1998).

Prudence

Prudence is normally conceived of as an intellectual virtue. Jeffries (1998) defined it as "the use of reason to correctly discern that which helps and that which hinders realizing the good" (p. 154). When applied to goal striving, prudence is foresight, future-mindedness, and the reasoned pursuit of long-term goals (Haslam, 1991). Haslam (1991) identified five components of prudence: (a) It is concerned with the choice, planning, and pursuit of long-term, virtuous ends; (b) it invokes a concern with identity, self-continuity, and personal integration as one projects oneself into the future; (c) it involves the rational pursuit of appropriate ends; (d) it involves maximizing the satisfaction of multiple goals; and (e) it seeks the good of the individual's self-interest without being collectively destructive. Little empirical work on the concept of prudence exists, and no individual difference measure of prudence exists. Goal theorists would themselves be prudent to dip into the well of collective wisdom that has accrued from rich philosophical accounts of this concept and to apply the concept to understanding individual differences in goal selection and life management.

Patience

Patience is commonly said to be a virtue, but it is not a virtue commonly included in contemporary discussions of the good life. Patience is the "ability to dwell gladly in the present moment" (Roberts, 1984, p. 53) when one would rather be doing something else. Patience is not just aimlessness, an absence of striving. Patience enables people to be attentively responsive to others, to be responsive to opportunities for goal attainment. Roberts contends that patience "is a necessary condition for the accomplishment of anything worthwhile" (p. 54). Harned (1997) discussed four primary

meanings of patience: (a) suffering with calmness or composure, (b) forbearance and tolerance of others, (c) willingness to wait without resentment, and (d) constancy and consistency in effort (what I refer to below as perseverance). One might view patience as a necessary counterforce for the frenzied activity that future orientation and goal striving can sometimes produce. Much like prudence, psychologists have paid scant attention to this virtue, although they have studied it under related guises (e.g., delay of gratification in children).

Perseverance

Although patience is about the present, perseverance focuses on the future. Perseverance is the ability to keep commitments, to be steadfast, to endure despite obstacles, to make sacrifices, and to resist temptations to give up (Brickman, 1987). For the good life, perseverance must be combined with the right kind of goals. Without the right goals perseverance is useless, or worse: “A person who is merely persistent may be a carping, pestering, irksome annoyance, having no salutary effect whatsoever” (Bennett, 1993, p. 528). In the right combination with other virtues, perseverance is “an essential ingredient in human progress” (Bennett, 1993, p. 528). In contrast to prudence and patience, psychologists have shown more interest in the concept of perseverance and related constructs such as commitment (e.g., Brickman, 1987).

Future research on goals and SWB (and more broadly, the study of human motivation and emotion) might profit by incorporating the language and constructs of virtue ethics. Far from being the quaint vestigial remains of a bygone era, these constructs are powerful tools for research in positive psychology. The study of virtue as an aspect of personality is enjoying something of a renaissance in contemporary research (Cawley, Martin, & Johnson, 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2000; Snyder & McCullough, 2000). In addition to facilitating self-regulatory activity, individual differences in these virtues might have a direct, main effect on SWB (Dube, Kairouz, & Jodoin, 1997).

CONCLUSION

In a systematic review of the goals construct in clinical psychology, Karoly (1999) concluded that a motivational perspective centered around personal goals could articulate “a vision of a troubled human life.” It has been my thesis in this chapter that a goals orientation to human functioning might also articulate a vision of “the good life” and the “positive person.” Happiness and life satisfaction, two spheres of subjective experience of concern to psychologists articulating a vision of the good life, are influenced in deep ways by the goals that people are committed to. Thanks to the

efforts of a young cadre of researchers, considerable progress has been made in the development of integrative theoretical models for understanding motivational influences on well-being.

Space limitations prevent me from reviewing all of the literature on goal constructs and well-being. Furthermore, many of the conclusions that I have reached in this chapter need to be appropriately qualified. Certain life goals may fail to meet basic human needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Inflexible striving for unattainable or foolhardy goals can bring misery and suffering rather than joy and fulfillment. Goals, when they fulfill individualistic but not collective or societal needs, may ultimately lead to lower quality of life and a worsening of interpersonal relationships. Even usually positive characteristics can have harmful consequences. For example, spirituality, when it results in excessive self-preoccupation, can discourage generative actions such as responsible parenting (Dollahite, 1998). Furthermore, excessive choices, when it comes to available goals and pathways to achieve them, may be disabling instead of empowering (Schwartz, 2000).

I therefore end this chapter with a call for wisdom. Along with the virtues discussed in this chapter, to know which goals are out of reach, which are not in our best interest, and which really matter is essential for the good life. The late philosopher Robert Nozick (1989) defined wisdom as “being able to see and appreciate the deepest significance of whatever occurs and understanding not merely the proximate goods but the ultimate ones, and seeing the world in this light” (p. 276). A wise person knows which goals are ultimately fulfilling and which offer only the illusion of fulfillment and thus will order his or her life accordingly. According to the research reviewed in this chapter, wisdom would be manifested in the choice to pursue positively framed, self-transcendent strivings in a prudent, patient, and persevering manner. And lest we get too caught up in the process of setting and strivings for goals, I would be remiss if I failed to mention the importance of savoring, appreciating, and celebrating the pursuit of one’s goals.

We now know a lot about how goals make life meaningful, valuable, and worth living. Using this information for prevention, for the diagnosis of human strengths, as well as for intervention, should be among the meaningful and manageable goals of a positive psychology.

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