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Happy Healers

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Family Medicine residency programs in the United States are required to promote resident well-being.[1] One way we do this is by teaching a seminar on the concepts of Positive Psychology pioneered by psychologist, Dr. Martin Seligman. In preparation for the seminar, we ask the residents to write responses to modified versions of three exercises that have been shown by Dr. Seligman to promote happiness. The exercises are called “three good things in life,” “using signature strengths in a new way,” and “a gratitude visit.”[2] The purpose of the exercises is to give the residents an opportunity to experience the benefits of Positive Psychology themselves while providing them with some practical tools they can use to help their own patients.

To introduce the seminar, we play the song “Don’t Worry be Happy” by Bobby McFerrin and review an article from the British Medical Journal which demonstrated that happiness is contagious.[3] The authors discovered that one happy person could not only infect those who were immediately around him or her, but that his or her influence could even extend to the friend of a friend. To illustrate how contagious happiness can be, we show a scene from the movie *Mary Poppins* (1964).

In the clip that we watch, Mary Poppins and the Banks children are summoned by their friend, Bert, to help save Uncle Albert from floating uncontrollably in the air. His levitation is caused by laughing. During the scene, Uncle Albert and Bert sing “I Love to Laugh,” and as they sing, Bert floats up to be with Uncle Albert. Eventually the children become infected with laughter, and everybody, including Mary, joins Uncle Albert up in the air. Their uncontrolled laughter also infected the residents who were watching them with smiles and laughter.

Next, we turn our attention to Dr. Seligman’s book, *Authentic Happiness*, which describes three different kinds of happy lives: the pleasant life, the good or engaged life, and the meaningful life.[4] To help illustrate and explain each of these lives, we show selected scenes from the Disney movie, *The Lion King* (1994).

We begin with the opening scene of the movie in which Rafiki, the Shaman, anoints Simba, the newborn cub of King Mufasa and Queen Sarabi, as the heir to the throne with the song, “The Circle of Life,” playing in the background. *The Lion King* can be analyzed from a number of different perspectives.[5] For the seminar, we focus on Simba’s psychological development from a playful child into a mature, responsible adult.[6]

In the next scene, we watch Mufasa beginning Simba’s royal education by showing him the boundaries of their kingdom, and explaining, “there’s more to being king than getting your way all the time.” Despite the lesson, Simba displays a rather immature view of what it means to be king by singing “I Just Can’t Wait to be King,” during which he wishes for the day when nobody can tell him what to do.

Simba’s immaturity allows him to be lured into a plot to kill his father by his jealous uncle, Scar. Scar then convinces Simba that he was responsible for his father’s death and gets him to run away. With Simba gone, Scar crowns himself King. After running away,

Simba attempts to suppress his grief and guilt over his father's death by ignoring his responsibilities as the rightful heir to the throne and adopting the philosophy of the song, "Hakuna Matata," which "means no worries...It's our problem-free, philosophy, Hakuna Matata!"

"Hakuna Matata" could be the theme song for Dr. Seligman's pleasant life. This life consists of maximizing one's positive emotions focusing on fun and amusement in the spirit of "Hakuna Matata." When asked to describe their pleasant lives, the residents included watching movies, eating chocolates, dining out, playing music, and drinking hot tea after a long day of work. Positive emotions are not the sole determinant of happiness according to Dr. Seligman who offers a broader conception of happiness in what he calls the good or engaged life.

The good life is characterized by the pursuit of gratifications. Unlike pleasures, gratifications are not feelings but are activities that engage us so fully that we lose all sense of time and self such as being engaged in your favorite hobby. Psychologist Dr. Csikszentmihalyi coined the term "flow" to describe this altered state of consciousness.[7] To illustrate flow, we show a performance of the song and dance "Electricity" from the show, "Billy Elliot, the Musical." "Billy Elliot" is the story of a boy's journey from an English mining town to the Royal Ballet School. In responding to the question, "What does it feel like when you're dancing?" Billy sings, "I suppose it's like forgetting, losing who you are,...And suddenly I'm flying, flying like a bird,...electricity, sparks inside of me, and I'm free, I'm free." Afterward, residents described how they derive a sense of flow from walking their dogs, listening to music, and playing the piano.

Dr. Seligman explains that we can increase our gratifications by indentifying our personal strengths and virtues, and then using them to the greatest extent possible in our daily lives. This process provides authenticity to our gratifications and creates what he calls, "Authentic Happiness." Using the "Values in Action Strengths Survey" we ask the residents to identify their top personal strengths.[8] Their range of responses included love of learning, spirituality, kindness, caring for others and perseverance.

Having described the good life, we return to *The Lion King* to see how Simba moves from the pleasant life of "Hakuna Matata" toward the good life. Nala, Simba's childhood sweetheart, has just found Simba. With the song, "Can You Feel the Love Tonight" heard in the background, Simba and Nala lovingly play together, but Nala observes, "He's holding back, he's hiding,...why won't he be the king I know he is, the king I see inside?" Simba's inability to recognize the strengths and virtues within himself, and his refusal to return home to assume his rightful position as king causes their new relationship to falter.

In our next scene, Rafiki uses his magical powers to summon the spirit of King Mufasa who tells Simba, "You have forgotten who you are,...Look inside yourself, Simba. You are more than what you have become...Remember who you are." Inspired by his father's spirit, Simba now recognizes his inner strengths of courage and leadership, and he

declares, "I'm going back!" In the next clip, Simba reunites with Nala after surveying the destruction caused by Scar, and together they commit to defeating Scar and restoring harmony to their kingdom. Acting on this commitment is what Dr. Seligman calls a meaningful life. This is a life characterized by using your strengths and virtues in the service of something larger than yourself. In the final scenes of the movie, Simba defeats Scar, and we see Simba and Nala enjoying a good, meaningful life as they watch Rafiki present their newborn son to the kingdom with "The Circle of Life" playing in the background.

In reacting to the movie, we ask the residents to share how they would live a meaningful life. One of the residents talked about serving the Spanish speaking community in which she grew up, and another said she "derives tremendous happiness from providing medical care to the underserved." A third year resident stated that her long term goal and life of meaning will be fulfilled when she provides community service to her home town in India.

Finally, we review the residents' responses to the three exercises they were given prior to the seminar. The first, "Using Signature Strengths in a New Way" involves identifying your top strengths and then using them in a new way. One resident described how she extended her strength of kindness to listening to an elderly woman on a train tell her about her life. Another talked about how she used her love of learning: "Before I got married, I always associated learning with medicine and never had any interest in cooking. Then, one day post-call, I surprised myself by deciding to cook for my husband. I got a cookbook, followed a recipe step by step until I made a dish. I'm not sure if it tasted good, but my husband liked it, and that's what matters!"

In "Three Good Things in Life" you are asked to write down three things that went well each day for a week. A third year resident wrote about having patients thank her and saying how much they will miss her when she leaves. Another talked about finding out she was pregnant and that her husband got a job.

A "Gratitude Visit" involves writing a letter and personally delivering it to someone who has been especially kind to you but has never been properly thanked. One resident wrote about her father, who died just before she started medical school, saying "He not only supported my academic work, but he also provided me with a great deal of love and emotional support." Someone else wished to visit her grandfather because, "my grandfather only had a primary education, but knew the importance of being educated. He supported and encouraged us to pursue higher education and professional degrees. His kindness and willingness to help others have always motivated me to help and care for others."

Each of the residents was given a copy of Seligman's *Authentic Happiness* for both their personal and professional use. In addition to the exercises used during the seminar, the book contains other tools the residents could use with their patients to enhance their happiness. As a result of the positive mood created in the program by the seminar, one of

the faculty was inspired to distribute yellow, smiley face buttons to all of the residents and staff.

At the conclusion of the seminar, residents are urged to seek a full life. A full life is described by Dr. Seligman as one that is filled with pleasure, the goodness of engagement, and above all else meaning, through the commitment to something larger than oneself. This will enable residents to infect the patients and communities they serve with their authentic happiness, and perhaps even become known as contagiously happy healers.

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