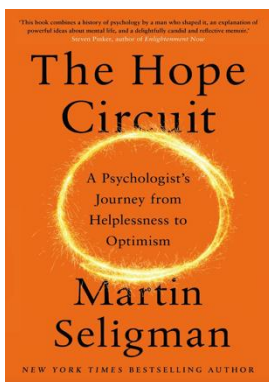


The Hope Circuit by Martin E. P. Seligman

A Psychologist's Journey from Helplessness to Optimism by Martin Seligman

About the author

Dr. Martin Seligman is an American psychologist, researcher and professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. He was President of the American Psychological Association in 1998, during which he promoted Positive Psychology as a field of scientific study. He is a leading authority in the fields of Positive Psychology, resilience, learned helplessness, depression, optimism and pessimism. He is also a recognized authority on interventions that build strengths and well-being. He has written more than 350 scholarly publications and 30 books. Among his better-known works are *Flourish*, *Authentic Happiness* and *Learned Optimism*.



Bullet summary

- This book illuminates the history, philosophy and often bitter politics of psychology.
- It elaborates on the evolution and revolutions in Seligman's own thinking, and how they drove his great contributions to the field.
- It unfolds the mind and personality of Seligman himself, and his life at the very top of the academic tree.

Summary

The Hope Circuit (2018) is an autobiography of Seligman's life and work, explaining how Psychology was revolutionized during his long career (from classical Psychology towards Positive Psychology) and how he contributed to those deep, fundamental changes.

The author presents the modern history of Psychology focusing on four major transformations that occurred in the past 50 years and in which Seligman had a great impact: 1) the abandonment of behaviorism as the sole focus of Psychology while embracing cognition and consciousness, 2) accepting human evolution as well as the human brain as key components of mental balance, 3) the end of psychology's fixation on mental illness and the redirection of its focus towards enhancing well-being, and 4) the realization that for humans, shaping their lives and taking decisions that lead to a more meaningful life, is based on their ability to visualize various possible futures rather than reflecting on their past.

Experiencing these transformative years, Seligman explains how he learned to study Optimism. He sheds light on various human stories behind some of his major research findings and elaborates extensively on the notion of 'learned helplessness' which he later acknowledged as 'false' and which also led him later on to the introduction of 'learned optimism'. In his book, he also refers to Positive Education and the US army's resilience program. Meanwhile, he reveals his own battles with depression from a young age. Overall, he makes a compelling and deeply personal case for the importance of virtues like hope, optimism, gratitude, kindness and wisdom for our mental health.

Extended Summary

Part 1: Beginning

Martin Seligman who was really bright as a child, used to read books from a very young age. Comic books, space science books, and great novels. At the age of 13, he fell in love with Sigmund Freud's books. He was confident with an exceptionally high IQ. His childhood experiences, his parent's lack of optimism, his father's attitude of helplessness towards life along with the Great Depression and the World War II, triggered a genuine interest in psychology inside him, leading him to explore how negative experiences provoke negative feelings. When he turned 18, he realized that he was depressive and pessimistic towards life, he wore black clothes, he frequently thought about death, and kept a journal elaborating on his negative thoughts.

Seligman's initial interest laid more on philosophical issues, rather than topics of psychology. He was attracted by ethics, logic, politics, science and especially by the fact that philosophy was based on everyday life and human behavior. What is more, philosophy was a topic of research for great men, compared to psychology which was still under-distinguished as a science. A few years later, psychology gradually became more prestigious. This is when Seligman realized that psychology is actually "the physics of the mind". After spending hours of studying and working in academia, he realized that he had a natural tendency towards psychology and a special talent in experimental psychology.

He started researching the notion of 'consciousness' and concluded that cognition is related to emotions (i.e. thoughts of loss produce sadness). A big milestone in his research which came as a result of many experiments with animals, was Learned Helplessness, which refers to the source of endless suffering of animals and people.

Learned helplessness, is defined as a mental state in which an organism forced to bear aversive stimuli, or stimuli that are painful or otherwise unpleasant, becomes unable or unwilling to avoid subsequent encounters with those stimuli, even if they are "escapable," presumably because it has learned that it cannot control the situation (definition by Britannica.com). Essentially, learned helplessness refers to the non-attempt to change a continuous, negative circumstance or situation even when you have the ability to do so. Until that point, Seligman was mainly interested in researching anxiety, hopelessness, fear and depression.

Part 2: Becoming

Seligman was asked to teach experimental psychology courses. He had his own, unique way of transferring knowledge to his students. At the same time, his teaching techniques were unconsciously helping him put together his scientific theories. His teaching classes were overbooked with graduates. In 2012, Martin Seligman came across someone who posed a question about Learned Helplessness and its implementation on people, focusing on the notion of depression and suicide. This is what triggered him to start exploring human mental illnesses.

Seligman, together with his colleague Steve Maier, soon concluded through experiments in animals that Learned Helplessness was only temporary.

An unpleasant event in his life, his parents' marriage gradual fade out, caused him intense negative feelings and a sense of helplessness. What is interesting is that even though he had done research on the topic, he felt like he could not help himself. This is what urged him to start researching mental

health in humans focusing on depression. Seligman, despite having the 'ideal job' and being highly reputable for his experimental psychology theories which were key for him to continue his thorough research on relative topics, admitted feeling anxious and full of negativity at the time.

His theories around control, cognition, and Learned Helplessness, were getting really famous as time passed and other scientists tried to replicate his experiments. Seligman's success in studying helplessness in labs, helped him in his research on human helplessness. He assumed that the same way an animal stands helpless in escaping a loud noise, a human will also be helpless in solving problems. He continued investigating Learned Helplessness, and started writing about it. He soon published his first book on Learned Helplessness. It was of great significance for him to understand how Learned Helplessness was connected to depression and whether more pessimistic people got depressed more easily.

Living an eventful life full of successes and noteworthy scientific achievements despite his young age, Seligman reached the age of 40 experiencing depression himself. It was around that time that together with a colleague, they published the 'Attributional Style Questionnaire', providing insights on the characteristics of depressed individuals. As his research became more thorough on the topic, he started elaborating on mental health and the correlation of mental illnesses with various attributional styles and disorders. In the midst of his extensive research on depression and his personal experience with it, he somehow came across the happiness path.

Part 3: Being

Seligman's personal life events helped him move his research further. His wife's question "Are you happy?" was the driving force which made him realize that what humans should do is choose to be less miserable, less pessimistic and increase positive possibilities in life. Gradually, some years later his way of thinking started turning into a more positive one.

Despite the fact that in the previous years, he was more interested in exploring depression and negative feelings like anxiety (which he compared to the 'deeper' part of a cappuccino, the espresso, contrary to the foam which represented happiness), his interest in optimism gradually grew further. He started noticing people who were strong, despite the fact that they were suffering. He was intrigued by the fact that until then people kept focusing on failure instead of success, on sadness instead of happiness.

As such, Seligman began writing a book on Learned Optimism. Based on his findings, an important skill optimists own is that they avoid negative thoughts that come to mind naturally. This is a skill that can be learned. Learned Optimism had similar characteristics to Cognitive Therapy. Both could help treat depression through therapy. In 1996, Seligman became president of the APA (American Psychological Association).

At the same time, Mike Csikszentmihalyi was working on the 'flow' concept, which can be described as the state of being fascinated while experiencing positive feelings. Seligman was influenced by him, and through incorporating his own theories he introduced the concept of Positive Psychology in 1999. His research focused on investigating topics such as wellbeing and hope, happiness, optimism, gratitude, kindness, forgiveness, creativity, humor, courage as well as other character strengths. This is how the 24 virtues and strengths framework was introduced by Seligman and Peterson.

Part 4: Flourishing

Seligman grew to understand how psychology helped him deal with his own personal battles in life, with his career, his relationship with friends and family and that it had turned him gradually into a positive thinker. At the age of 60, he felt that he was at the peak of his life and that his career had flourished. However, he still felt that he had not yet reached the ultimate happiness level in life. He developed his theory that good external situations (work, love) together with good internalities results in happiness. Together with other psychologists he analyzed concepts such as flow, virtue, positive emotions and happiness. At the same time, he created a Master's program about Positive Psychology as well as developed the PERMA model (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment). It was then when he also started exploring exercises to help people deal with depressive symptoms in their daily life.

His work received wide applause as well as criticism. Some people expressed concerns that positive psychology is individualistic and that it does not really change anything. Others went as far as to claim that some of the exercises suggested were placebo.

Seligman also explored the concept of the good as the absence of the bad. He compared the good/bad context with the hot and cold senses which are opposites, but which can also have various degrees. He insisted on therapists attempting to help patients eliminate suffering and negativity, stating the latter as the criterion for successful therapy. The ultimate purpose was to reach wellbeing.

Money and education were also part of his research topics. Based on his findings, money can eliminate ill-being also depending on an individual's overall financial state. However, money cannot produce more well-being. With regards to education, Seligman suggests that discipline, hard work, literacy and conformity are some of the characteristics that schools help children develop at a young age; however, they are not enough. According to him, positive thinking and positive education must be introduced in schools.

Happiness, meaning in life, fulfillment, engagement, optimism and resilience are only some of the strengths and positive emotions children need to develop to reach wellbeing. Seligman talks about applying positive psychology to as many as fields as possible. Finance, school, the army and even the CIA who asked him to train soldiers and diplomats. Various people in the army commit suicide, take drugs and develop panic or depressive disorders. Positive psychology and resilience can help them with these issues. Last but not least Seligman talks about physical health. He suggests that physical illness is related to psychological illness. Studies show that heart disease and other conditions can be developed due to bad psychological health.

Part 5: Looking into the future

Towards the end of his book, Seligman elaborates on his thoughts about the future of mental health and well-being. He talks about how psychology falsely used to unfold situations based on what was wrong and ignored what was going well. He also explains that psychology used to analyze past experiences to predict what the future would look like. Seligman suggests that the mind should analyze what happened in the past but also try to create a better future. To do that, he mentions that people need to think about the future based on their intentions and not on what has happened in the past or what they have been used to doing.

In addition, he talks about increasing creativity levels at a young age, since aging makes humans forgetful, slower, and more easily tired. We should use shortcuts, which are called heuristics (*positive* - what to do and *negative* - what NOT to do). "Positive heuristics are the heart of creativity" he states.

Seligman continues his research until today. Based on his findings all organisms are adaptive and have the ability to detect threats as well as protect themselves from them. Our bodies activate defensive reflexes and try to 'shut down' to get protected. This is how athletes, soldiers, pilots etc. remain calm in stressful situations and avoid panic. Based on the latter, he concludes that 'helplessness' is not 'learned' as he initially claimed. ***It is only a reaction of our body to unpleasant events.*** Our purpose as humans should be to learn how to notice and control incoming unpleasant events and remove ourselves from the 'anxiety zone'. Martin Seligman decided to write this book in his attempt to leave misery behind and move forward towards happiness. All humans should accept that our thoughts can bring us unpleasant feelings like sadness, fear and anger, but they can also bring us happiness, joy and hope!

Source: *The Hope Circuit*, Martin E.P. Seligman, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, January 2019

