



Spas and the Science of Happiness

General Session: Panel

Wednesday, June 6th 2012 2:30pm – 3:15pm

McNulty Gathering Room, Doerr-Hosier Center, The Aspen Institute

Speaker (Happiness):

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Transcription:

Taylor Gannon, Assistant Marketing Coordinator, Global Spa & Wellness Summit

JEREMY MCCARTHY: Thank you, Mary. A few years ago I went back to school to study applied positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, and the number-one question I got from many of my colleagues in the spa industry was, “Oh, are you leaving the spa industry?” I think that’s a really interesting question when you consider that we define ourselves as places that enhance wellbeing across body, mind and spirit, but we don’t seem to think about the study of mental wellbeing as being a part of what we do. I think, as I look around at our industry (and look at how we tend to market ourselves around facilities, treatments, the ingredients in our products), that I have come to the conclusion that, even in the spa industry, even in the ethereal, holistic, airy fairy, foo foo la la spa world, we focus predominantly on the physical, and we don’t spend as much time as we should thinking about the psychological impact of what we do.

I can kind of understand why we haven’t turned to psychology because psychology for most of the last 50 to 100 years has been very negative. So if Sigmund Freud was here with us today, he would look at all of us and think: most of us, deep inside, are pretty dark and twisted. We have all kinds of problems in our head that stem from early childhood. And the only way we will ever overcome them is through extensive psychotherapy. Marty Seligman, in 1998, was the president of the American Psychological Association, and he felt that somewhere along the way, psychology had forgotten its mission – which is supposed to be to help people live better lives – and after World War II, we had gotten exclusively in the business of fixing people that were broken. He proposed a new field of psychology that would be based upon the positive side of psychology of life, positive psychology, and it would focus not only

on what's wrong with people, but what is right with people. And not on what are the things we want less of in life, but what are the things we want more of in life: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, a sense of purpose or meaning, accomplishment, all of things that contribute to a flourishing life.

Over the last 10 years we have seen a lot of new research coming out, including the research on willpower, that helps us understand much better how to live the good life. **And for the first time, when you go into the self-help section, most of these books are written by researchers, and they're based on randomized control experiments so we're really scientifically trying to understand what happiness is, and what it means to us.**

I would say the happiness stock has gone up and down throughout the course of the last three days. I always hesitate a little bit to get up in front of an audience of professional, scientifically minded people and talk about happiness **because happiness seems to have a bad reputation. It's very shallow, it's superficial, it's somewhat hedonistic, and I think we wrestle with this in the spa industry.** We wrestle with our own pampering identity and what we stand for in the spa is making people feel good. We try to shy away from this, and we try to focus more on wellness rather than pampering or feeling good, but the interesting thing is that there are some real serious beneficial outcomes tied to happiness. **Happy people have better relationships, they have better marriages, they use their minds more creatively, they're better leaders, they're more successful at work, they earn more money, they're healthier, they have better physical health, and they have better mental health.** So there is something about feeling good and being well, which is really tied together. I think that is something we should pay attention to.

One study linking health and happiness is this study looking at the baseball cards of professional baseball players from 1952. It turns out that the smiles on the faces on the baseball players could predict their longevity in 2009 – 60 years later. There is tons of research like that.

One of the researchers who has done a lot of work on positive emotions is Barbara Frederickson. Martin Seligman refers to Barbara as “the genius of positive psychology” for her “broaden and build” theory of positive emotion. We've known for a long time the purpose of negative emotions. Negative emotion helps us confront a problem. You are confronting an enemy, you feel angry and you're prepared to fight. You confront a threat, you feel fear, and you're prepared to flee. But why do we feel good? Why do positive emotions help us? Why has that evolved? Barbara Frederickson's research shows that while negative emotions narrow our focus on a problem, positive emotions open our horizons, they open our hearts and minds, and

we notice things around us that we wouldn't elsewhere notice. We become open to more possibilities, and that openness leads us to learn, and grow, and develop resources that help us in our lives.

To give you some examples on how this ties into wellness and health: One way is through relationships. When we are in a positive state, we're open to more people, we see similarities we share with other people more readily, and we're more likely to build friendships and a social network, and there's all kinds of research linking having that social support network to our health. George Vaillant, who is the author of [*Aging Well*](#) and [*Spiritual Revolution*](#), has done research through Harvard, and he says if you ask people the question, "Who can you call at two in the morning if you need someone?" you can predict someone's health with that question.

The other way is positive health behaviors, so when we're in a positive state and we're feeling good, we're more likely to want to get out and pursue positive activity. You're in a negative mood – what do you want to do? You maybe want to eat ice cream, drink alcohol, watch re-runs of *Jersey Shore*. We wouldn't get very creative when we are not in a good mood. **When you are in a good mood, suddenly, you want to get out and see the world. You want to go outside and play, you want to connect with friends, and you want to pursue your goals because you're more open to the big picture of your life and what those goals mean to you.**

Finally, there are all kinds of research linking biological markers of health with positive emotions. **Happier people tend to have better cardiovascular functioning, better immune functioning, longer telomeres and better response to stress.** Everybody in the room knows the negative impacts of stress on health, but positive emotions act as a shield buffering us from stress. When we are in a positive state, our stress system reacts less often, we adapt to stressors more quickly, and when our stress system does react, it goes back down to normal and gets back down to baseline more quickly.

There are two takeaways that I have for the spa industry taking on this. **The first is that I think we need to get inside our customers' heads; we need to think about the definition that we have put on ourselves, that we're offering body, mind, spirit and wellbeing.** So we need to really think about the mental and spiritual side of that. **The spa experience is not really about, in my opinion, facilities, treatments and products. It's really, at the end of the day, about how did we make our customers feel?** I think the good news for the spa industry is that we make our customers feel really good. And that is our strength.

I've heard over the past few days, a lot of talk about being more scientific, about focusing on health, about being evidence-based, about using technology. I think those are all great ideas, and we need to continue working on that. We need to get better at all of those things, but there are a lot of other healing institutions that are doing that already, and they are doing it much better than we do. **What we do really well is provide healing that feels good because there is no other healing institution that people look forward to going to, that people enjoy when they are there, and that people remember fondly afterwards, the way they do spa.** I think as we are focusing on wellness, we should stay close to that core strength that we have, which is wellness that feels good.

Thank you.

Q & A with Jessica Alquist & Jeremy McCarthy

MARY TABACCHI: What comes first? Is it willpower or happiness? They have to interact because when I'm happy, I have got way more willpower. Can you explain? Take it away.

JESSICA ALQUIST: There is no quick "which comes first," but there is evidence that happiness negates the effects of self-control. In some studies – on the effect of depletion – they'll come in and give someone a self-control task, and then they'll come in and give them a little present. Then they will measure their self-control again, and they don't show the depletion of the effect. So that's one way I think happiness definitely improves self-control.

JEREMY MCCARTHY: The other thing I would say, and Jessica touched on this in her presentation, is that mindfulness is kind of the intersection of those two things. In the last 10 years I think mental health has really focused on happiness – you saw all the books – that has been a huge trend. I think in the next 10 years, the focus will be mindfulness. Like Andrew Weil said, it's not about single-mindedly pursuing happiness, it's really about understanding your emotions and being able to use them to your advantage. The research that I talked about with Barbara Frederickson, she's found that **there is a ratio of three positive emotions to one negative emotion that is important for flourishing. What I think is interesting about that is that it is not 3 to 0.** It's not like we want to be happy all of the time because you get important information about the world from your negative emotions and about what is going on inside you and things that are going on around you. Mindfulness is kind of being able to globally look at all of that and, like Jessica touched on in her presentation, it's also that shifting of attention and being able to have the self-control

to focus your attention on what makes sense based on what is most meaningful to you.

MARY TABACCHI: I remember in some of our discussions, Jeremy, you talking about two levels of happiness? Could you talk about that a little bit because I'm really interested in that, I want to be happy on both levels – go for it.

JEREMY MCCARTHY: I think this is the problem with the word, happiness, and why we have heard different opinions about the word is that we use the word happiness all of the time, but it means different things. Sometimes we use it in pleasure, like how we feel if we eat ice cream, or have sex, or do something that feels really good, but we also mean it to mean someone who is just generally in a good mood all the time [Jeremy points to Mary Tabacchi] or seems to have a bubbly personality, so it's more of a stable personality trait. We also use it to mean how we feel about our life in general. Do we feel we have fulfilled our mission in life? I kind of describe it like there's the shallow end of the pool of happiness, which is more the superficial pleasure, but there's also that deep side of happiness, which is on your deathbed – if you look back, would you feel happy about what you have accomplished and the life that you have lived? So there are both levels of that.

MARY TABACCHI: It's a balance. So Jessica, would willpower fit into both of those or maybe the longer range kind of happiness?

JESSICA ALQUIST: Willpower, I think, almost only fits into the long-range view of it. There is some evidence that if people are primed to prioritize happiness, so if you set that as their goal, "Do whatever to stay happy right now," people will do all kinds of bad things for themselves and will do nothing that is good for them. A lot of things that are good for us maybe don't feel good in the moment, but may feel good in the long term. So happiness is really important, but maybe putting a lot of priority on that happiness as an individual can lead people a little bit astray, as far as, if they're not willing to occasionally step out of that shallow end, they're never going to get to that deep end.

JEREMY MCCARTHY: I agree. I think the way I see willpower – but it also ties into mindfulness – is when you come to a fork in the road, and you have to choose between that in the moment happiness, or that fork that goes towards something more meaningful and perhaps, long-term fulfillment, the willpower is what is going to make you go down the right fork. **If you don't have the willpower, then you are easily distracted by the momentary pleasure of short-term happiness.**

MARY TABACCHI: I think as we have heard, people talking about life-coaching and behavior change, and so on and so forth, I think one of things that strikes me is that health is a journey. It's a long-term thing. So when you are coaching people, or when you have people at your spa, or when you have people come to you and say, "I've tried to lose weight, or I've tried to do whatever" – we've just learned that dieting doesn't work; we just learned that there are a lot of things that really need to go into the long term. I think the question for both of you is, "How do we convince people that the long term really works?" We are kind of wired for short-term pleasure, short-term results, and so when we read these ads – "Lose 22 pounds in three days, just drink my fancy detox drink" – how do we get people around that, so they can see the long range?

JESSICA ALQUIST: I actually think that one of the best strategies is to set the goals more short term. I think that is something that people struggle with a lot, where there is this dichotomy between healthy and unhealthy people, and we either have to be doing everything right, or you are doing everything wrong. **I think if there could be more of an emphasis on the short term, and say, "Next week I'd like you to eat a vegetable a day" – let people set these very manageable short term goals.** Because I think it is really hard for people to look long term. **It's fascinating that we are even able to manage ourselves 50 years in the future. As far as we know, no other animal does that. I think it may be better to make our goals more in line with how we think than try to push our thinking too far into the future.**

MARY TABACCHI: That's probably something we really need to think about when we have guests at our spa, and we are trying to urge them to move forward to quickly. And the sustainability of it, that you think about the sustainability of whatever they are doing, become healthier, probably has to be in short steps? Am I interpreting that correctly?

JESSICA ALQUIST: Yes, that would be my inclination.

MARY TABACCHI: So what would you say when people come to a destination and they come with a goal. What would you advise us in this industry, how to encourage them to do that in a good way because they all want to come to us at the end of the week and say, "I didn't lose my 22 pounds; you failed." How would you handle that?

JESSICA ALQUIST: I would do your best to discourage people from setting unreasonable goals. There's a bookie that bets against those people that go on diets. He lets them set the parameters. So they say, "This is how much I am going to lose, and this is how long I am going to lose it, when I'm going to lose it by." And he bets against them and he wins 80 percent of the time. It's probably not good for health,

but it really illustrates when people set unreasonable goals, and if you, as wellness providers, can guide them towards understanding the limits of their bodies and understanding what will actually be sustainable – what will actually be good for them in the long term – I think that would go a long way. Obviously you can't convince everyone, but it would make a big difference.

JEREMY MCCARTHY: I think I come at this from a little different perspective because I work in the hotel-spa side of the business, so I have to keep my feet grounded in reality. We don't have people coming into my spas doing weeklong programs or trying to transform their health. **When they come into a spa, the way that I think about it is, "What's the smallest thing we can do in a 60-minute window that is going to have the biggest impact on someone?"** So that's why I do think pampering is important; I do think positive emotions are important. What are you giving your customers to think about for the hour they are on the massage table? If you can plant a seed that gets them thinking about either something they are thankful for, something they are hopeful for, or somebody that they love, and then you have just made that hour of experience something that is going to be much more of a physical relaxing massage experience – **they're now having this great moment of appreciation and mental wellbeing. I think that's what we can really do on the hotel side where we don't have all the programs and options available.**

MARY TABACCHI: I think that's great because we kind of have an answer to how we deal with people at various spas, and that's what I think is so important because all of it is so key to people's health, to helping our guest to wanting to come back. Is there a quick question from the audience? We have a couple of minutes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Can you talk about the sugar effect on the brain? If you stabilize sugar levels do you keep a better control?

JESSICA ALQUIST: There hasn't been as much research on that as we would like. The paper showing the effect of glucose came out about four years ago, so we move very slowly, because the studies take a long time. I don't know if somebody is working on that. There is some evidence that prisons [that] adopt healthier diets have fewer incidents and problems with prisoners. I think that is some evidence that speaks to changing peoples' diets might do that.

MARY TABACCHI: One last question? You guys are overwhelming. You're overpowering.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Have you done anything with your staff or unemployment with happiness?

JEREMY MCCARTHY: Yeah. Thank you for the soft ball, Jim. I sat next to Deborah Szekely at dinner last night, and she told me you have to talk about employee happiness because that is such an important part of the equation. Andrea Foster mentioned earlier things we are doing with Westin Hotels. **One of things we are doing is called an associate engagement program. Of all of the wellness programs that we have for our guests, we're trying to introduce to our employees in some ways as well. If we have super foods on the menu in their restaurant, it's also in the staff cafeteria, and we are educating the staff on that.** I needed to make sure I mentioned that so Deborah doesn't get mad at me later.

We are experimenting both on the shallow side of the pool and the deep side of the pool. We're doing a lot with gratitude, we have gratitude journals in the spa, where guests can write notes of appreciation or read the messages from other people. In another one of our spa concepts, we have what is called the "glow board," where people can leave notes of gratitude up on the board. We do a ritual in one of our spa concepts, where we ask the guests to choose before the treatment something they're thankful for, something they're hoping for or somebody that they love, and to focus on that during their treatment.

On the deep side of the pool, we're trying to get guests to focus on the meaning behind the visit. We kind of take it for granted, there's another anniversary or another birthday party, somebody got engaged, somebody is on their honeymoon, but we really want to connect with that meaning with the guests. We've been using notecards – this is actually an idea I got from Anne McCall Wilson at Fairmont – where we use notecards and allow the guests to either present notecards to each other if they're there for a couple's massage or a personalized notecard from the staff to recognize the special event that they're there for, but really making sure that we help them to experience the meaning of their visit.

MARY TABACCHI: Okay, how about that? Let's give a big round of applause. Woo hoo!