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Positive thoughts, positive results

Prizes reward psychologists for challenging negative myths

By Marilyn Elias
USA TODAY

Four young scientists 0 pathfinders in the fledgling "positive psychology" movement — will collect a total of \$200,000 today for work that veers off the beaten track of problem-centered psychology.

The largest monetary prize ever awarded to a psychologist, \$100,000, will go to Barbara Fredrickson, 35, a University of Michigan faculty member.

An additional \$100,000 will be distributed among second-, third- and fourth-place winners, to be announced at a Washington, D.C., news conference.

They are winners of the John Marks Templeton Positive Psychology Prize for original research on how to cultivate and build on human strengths.

The American Psychological Association (APA) will present the awards, financed by the Templeton Foundation in Philadelphia.

"We've got to do this to recruit the brightest young people for top-quality work on positive psychology. We have to replace the victimology that dominates our field today," says psychologist Martin E.P. Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Winners must be under 40 years old or must not have earned a doctorate more than 12 years ago.

Positive psychology began as the germ of an idea in Seligman's mind after he was elected APA president in 1997. He saw that about 95% of research on human emotion focused on the negative — a bleak gallery of scientific portraits of depression, anxiety, marital strife, violence and prejudice.

But what makes people happy? What gives them hope? How can they get along better? What's the savviest way to develop human talent? Seligman took the prevention of mental health problems as his chosen, year-long theme while APA president. But there was precious little scientific research on how to do it, he says.

With a few colleagues, he began to talk up a new movement in psychology,



By H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY

Thinking of home: Lisa Aspinwall, a University of Maryland psychologist, will put the \$15,000 personal-use portion of her award into buying a house.

searching for the "why" and "how" of human strength.

The idea caught fire, Seligman says. Now about 65 researchers are in a positive psychology "network," sharing their work, collaborating and rapidly expanding the sparse insights in the field.

Ground rules for the awards being presented today were negotiated by Seligman, APA officials and Templeton Foundation leaders. It's the first major foray into

psychology for the foundation, best known for supporting innovative spiritually oriented work. Its annual Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion has gone to such luminaries as Mother Teresa and Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

The psychology prizes will be given out annually for at least the next two years, says Arthur Schwartz of the Templeton Foundation.

Fredrickson, who captured first place,

has done work that suggests positive emotions — amusement, contentment — can speed physical recovery from the potentially heart-damaging effects of fear and anxiety.

In effect, an "up" state of mind might undo the racing heart and soaring blood pressure that follow bad experiences.

Her theory is that positive emotions are the adaptive but drastically under-researched counterpart to our fight-or-flight defensive reaction to threats.

Anger and fear narrow our thoughts and actions as we prepare to defend ourselves. Positive emotions — interest, joy — do just the opposite, Fredrickson believes. "They broaden and loosen our thinking, get us to be flexible, exploratory and creative." That, in turn, might help people combat the bad patches in their lives.

She's "flabbergasted" to have won first prize against 21 other entrants. Despite avid recent interest in positive psychology, "anything pleasurable is still seen as somewhat sinful in this society," she says. "Maybe it's our Calvinist or Protestant ethic, but that's the climate we're up against."

If there's one thread that runs through the work of the four winners, it's a healthy challenge to popular myths. Among them:

► **Optimists are amiable (probably IQ-challenged) Pollyannas who shield themselves from bad signs and aren't prepared when trouble strikes.**

Lisa Aspinwall, 34, a University of Maryland psychologist, got \$50,000 for work showing just the reverse.

She found that happy, optimistic people are more willing than pessimists to read bad news about their health habits and more willing to learn about their failures on tests.

They also remember bad news longer than pessimists do. Far from being unrealistic Pollyannas, optimists give up sooner than pessimists when presented with

Awards also support families

Winners of the Templeton Positive Psychology Prizes may use a specific portion of their award money any way they choose. The rest must be spent on research in positive psychology. Four psychologists won the awards:

First prize

Barbara Fredrickson, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor
Amount: \$100,000

Personal use: \$30,000. "We have a 2-month-old baby, so I can imagine 100 things we could use this money for."

Second prize

Lisa Aspinwall, University of Maryland at College Park
Amount: \$50,000

Personal use: \$15,000. "I'm putting a fair portion of it toward a down payment on a house."

Third prize

Dacher Keltner, University of California, Berkeley
Amount: \$30,000

Personal use: \$10,000. "It's going right into my children's college fund."

Fourth prize

David Lubinski, Vanderbilt University in Nashville
Amount: \$20,000

Personal use: \$7,500. "I'm using all of it for the research."

unsolvable problems, Aspinwall discovered.

"Pessimists may not want to know bad news about themselves because, unlike optimists, they don't think there's anything they can do about it," she says.

Optimists may want to know where they've erred "so they can improve later — of course, they think they can improve."

And their open approach promotes better relationships.

Optimistic couples are more likely than pessimists to bring up what's bothering them so it can be resolved. "They may be more confident that they can solve things," Aspinwall says, "but when something can't be solved, they seem to recognize that earlier."

► **Embarrassment, shame and teasing are all best avoided.**

An admission of embarrassment and shame about something promotes forgiveness from others. Those who refuse to own up have more trouble winning forgiveness, says psychologist Dacher Keltner, 38, of the University of California, Berkeley.

"That's probably where Clinton made a big mistake in the Lewinsky matter — he skirted around apologizing," Keltner says.

Keltner won \$30,000 for studies on how the "social wheels" are greased by behavior often mistaken as negative.

He also has found that teasing can be a useful social skill that builds friendships and helps resolve conflicts or negotiate changes in a relationship.

► **Gifted students tend to be narrow geeks who probably get what they need from school and don't require special programs or attention.**

Youngsters who score as gifted on tests at age 12 are most likely to be high achievers by their late 30s if they participate in plenty of enrichment programs, says Vanderbilt University psychologist David Lubinski, 46.

He's co-director of a long-term project tracking more than 5,000 gifted people starting at age 12. Some have been followed for 25 years.

The most able partake of more — not fewer — activities in high school than the typical student. They get pilot's licenses as teens, edit newspapers, play professional symphony gigs.

Lubinski won \$20,000 for some of his findings. His studies highlight the crucial need for enrichment, "but our society is much more sympathetic to special school programs for those with disabilities," he says.

"We need to cultivate these (gifted) children more than we have. They have a tremendous amount to contribute, and doing little for them is a recipe for underachievement."

Seligman hopes that today's awards will help cultivate gifted researchers in the burgeoning field of positive psychology.

"Doing this kind of science is hard. Outcomes are long in coming and chancy," he says. "The prizes are concrete feedback that what they're doing is valuable."