John Sommers-Flanagan, Ph.D.
Phyllis J. Washington
Center for the Advancement of Positive Education
University of Montana
John.sf@mso.umt.edu
Free Resources:
https://johnsommersflanagan.com



In Pursuit of Happiness

How to feel better in a challenging world

Presented on Behalf of VCU – 11/16/2026

Phyllis J. Washington
CAPE
CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF POSITIVE EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Gratitude First



Thanks to Dr. Waggy Zeleke and Paulette Lail Kashiri for the invitation and organizing this event.

Thanks to Phyllis Washington and our colleagues at CAPE

Thanks to YOU



Opening Story

20 Minutes of Play



Real Learning Objectives



1. Get out or get in! Ambivalence and letting in JOY
2. You come with YOUR knowledge, experience, and expectations – You come with YOUR WHY and PURPOSE
3. I offer a few ideas about the brain, MH, happiness, wellbeing, and YOUR JOY
4. You take what fits for you and apply it to yourself and in your work, if you feel like it
5. Just say no to Toxic Positivity and yes to singing



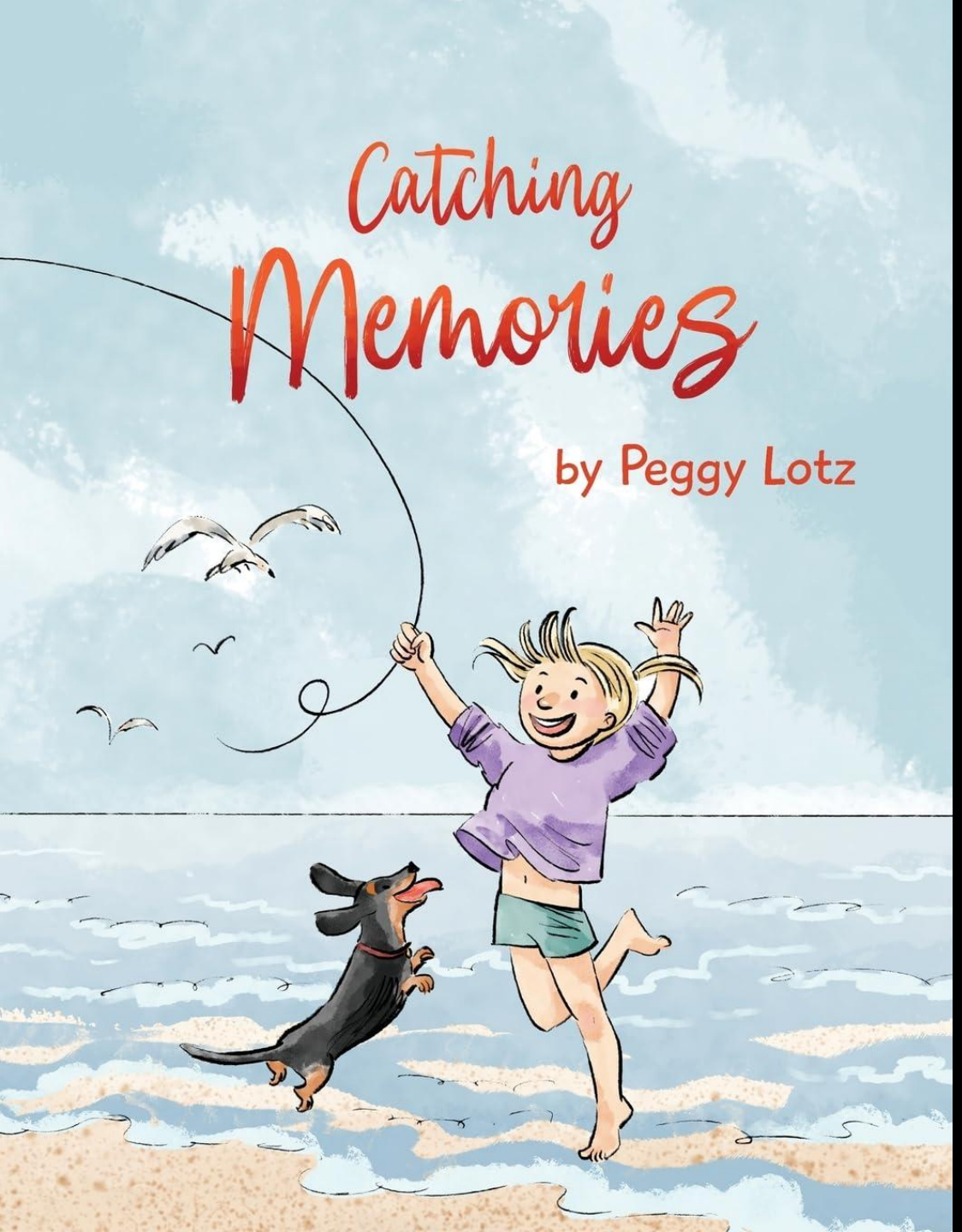
PREPARATION

Trigger Warnings

- I will talk about mental health, joy, and happiness
- I may say contrary things

Research indicates. . .

And now—Your very own strength-warning



Remember . . .

- The **Power of Suggestion**
- Trigger warnings **are suggestions** about what you might not be able to handle
- **Strength warnings** are suggestions about how learning new knowledge and gaining experiences **can make you STRONGER**

What Makes Happiness Hard?



Five big truths

We all know how much distress everyone is feeling

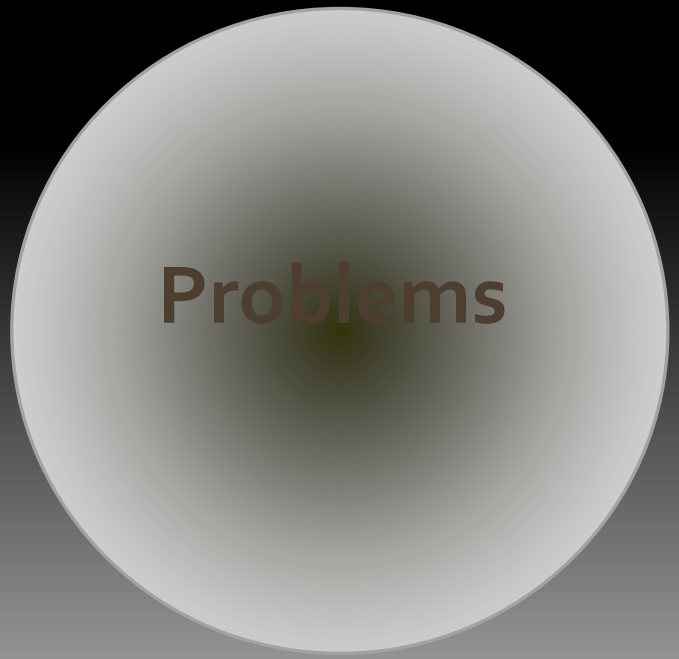


What's Wrong??

The Big Psych Truths we all face

1. We overfocus on what's wrong [21 negative:1 positive; medical; tiktok]
2. We find what we look for [CB]
3. What we pay attention to grows
4. Stopping negative behaviors is harder than adding positive behaviors
5. Social messaging about happiness is unhelpful

How does positive counseling and psychotherapy work?







The Muscle Metaphor [everyone with me] . . . Work Out with the Positive . . . Then what happens?

Big Truth 5 and PPI #1

The Wrong Happiness

Should we (and our students and families) even be pursuing happiness?



Pursuit of Happiness?

It depends. . .



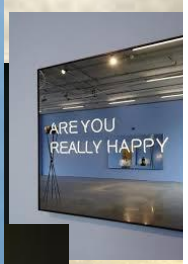
Yes to Eudaimonic Happiness

- Not an emotion
- Not material wealth
- Not political achievement
- Not so much an outcome, but a process of fulfilling one's virtuous potentials in the context of community

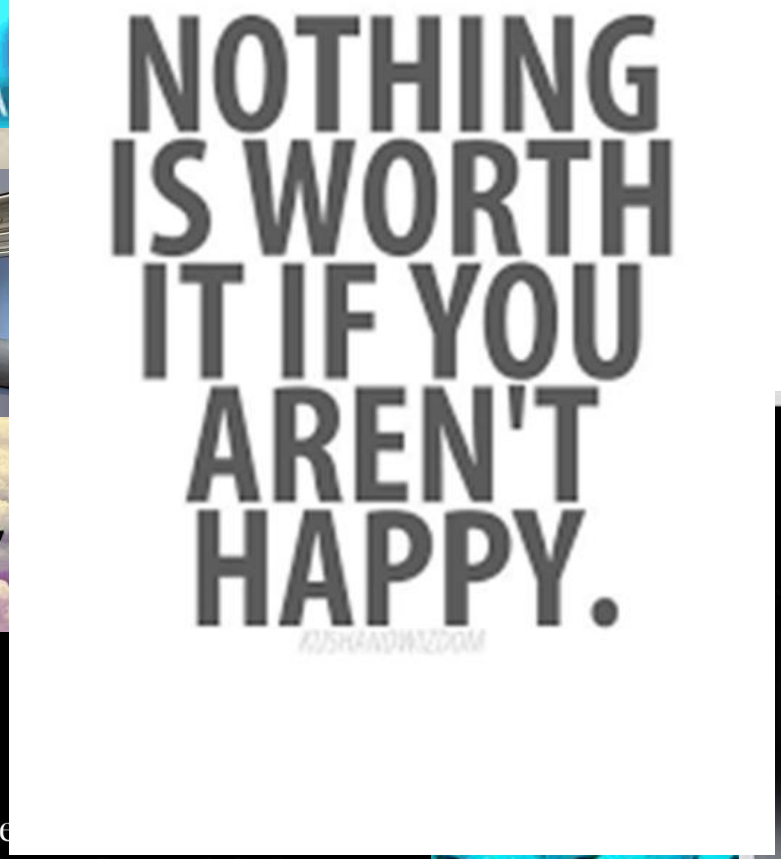
- And NO to these SELF-focused messages your brain can get hooked on . . .

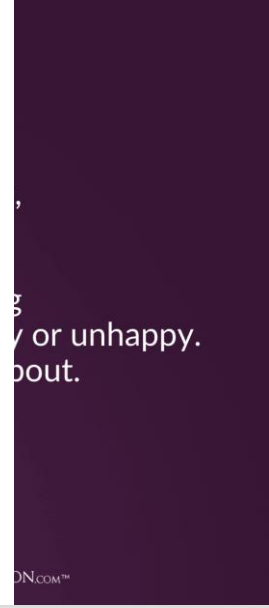

Are You
HAPPY
Or
SAD?

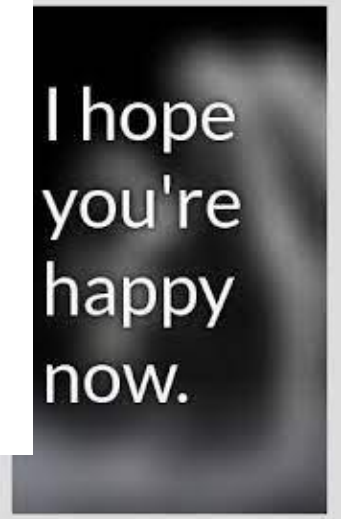

happy


ARE YOU
REALLY HAPPY


DO WHAT
AKES YOU
APPY


NOTHING
IS WORTH
IT IF YOU
AREN'T
HAPPY.


or unhappy.
bout.


I hope
you're
happy
now.


NO ONE CAN MAKE YOU
HAPPY UNTIL YOU'RE
HAPPY WITH YOURSELF
FIRST.
- ANONYMOUS

The
make you happy is being
happy with who you are,
and not who people think
you are.
GOLDIE HAWN
GRACIOUSQUOTES.COM


Are you
happy at work?

The Best Definition and You?



That place where your greatest and unique virtues, gifts, skills, and talents intersect with the needs of your friends, family, communities, tribe, and the world?

Story

Activity

Think of a nice story of your unique strengths (gifts, skills, talents, virtues) being reflected back to you at your school or with your tribe or community or at home or with friends. . . share it with a neighbor or two (4-5 min)

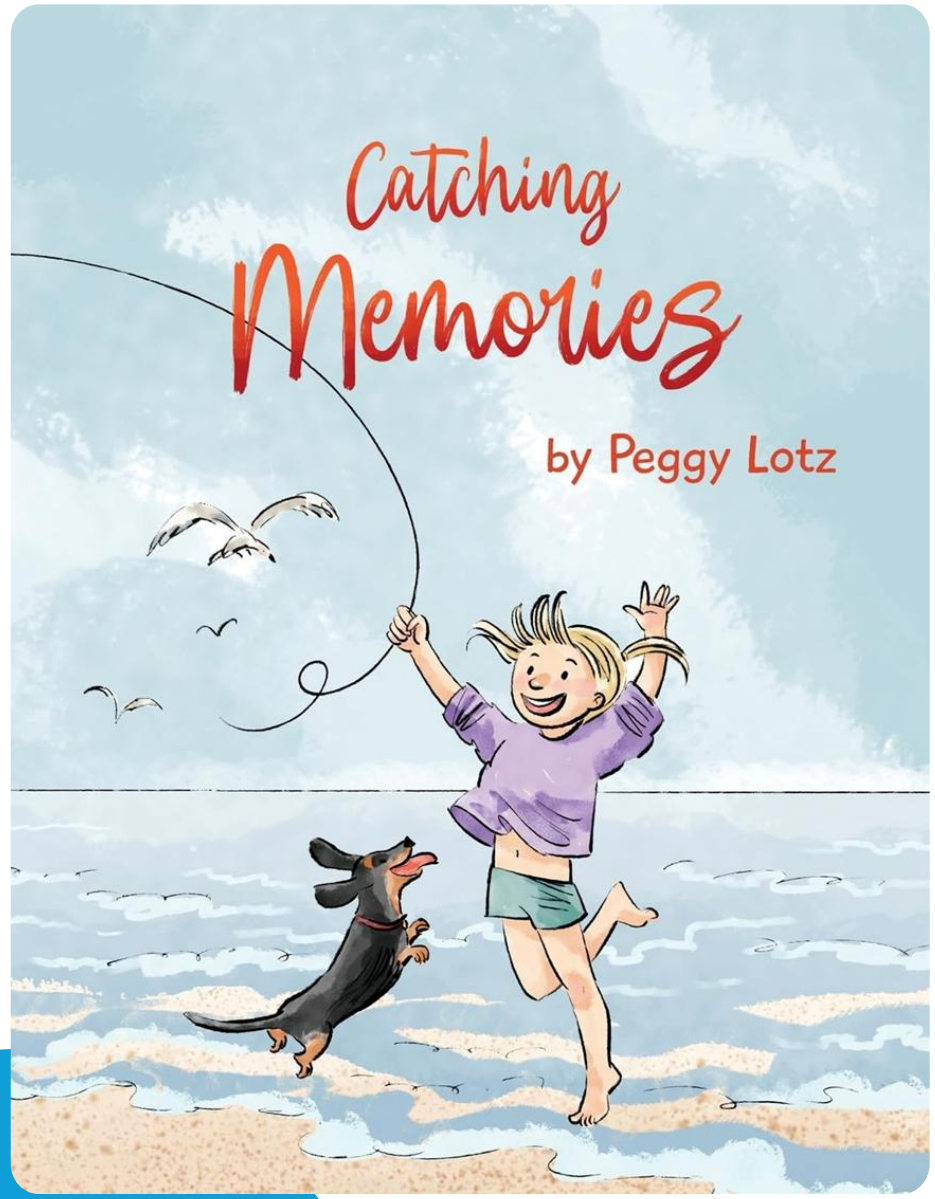
- This can feel awkward . . . Or**





Flip the Script

- Notice. . . with others, their unique strengths
- Name them and share them
- Being seen is great; being seen for your best qualities or intentions is EVEN better



PPI #2: Music and Mood

- Intermittent positive emotion reduces depression, **increases well-being, improves problem-solving, and reinforces new habits**
- How can you **intentionally** use music to feel better and for positive distractions?
- Why is this important to eudaimonic happiness?? **Hint: It's not just hedonic**

PPI #3: THREE GOOD THINGS

- ALL BY ITSELF IS **EVIDENCE-BASED FOR INSOMNIA**
- EVERYONE DOES BETTER WITH **BETTER SLEEP**
- **JSF SLEEP** VIDEO HERE: HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=QOXW_5DF3UE



Three Good Things



- Seligman's signature technique
  - Before you go to sleep (or right now)
  - Write down (or think about) three good things that happened during the day (or last 24 hours)
  - Then track down in your mind **"Why" those things happened**
  - Seligman: After a week, you'll want to keep doing it (JSF: Maybe)
  - **Volunteer**?



Does this Stuff Really Work?

CAPE and Wellbeing in Educators

We want healthier educators who are eudaimonically happier. . .and so CAPE offers an asynchronous 3-credit grad course. Did it work?



Our Outcomes



- **Before** the 3-credit course
- About **30%** of educators scored as **clinically depressed**
- 451 educators

After the Course

- **60% reduction in depression scores [to about 12%]**
- **But also, educators had:**
  - More hope, positive emotions, mindfulness, and social support
  - Better sleep, fewer headaches and sick days
  - Reduced gastrointestinal and respiratory distress
  - Med to Large Effect Sizes (*d*)



But those are just questionnaire results

What do educators say about the course?



We Asked 363 of the Educators

"Please share, using as few or as many words as you like, how you were impacted by taking the happiness for educators course."

321 (88%) responded to this optional question

All 321 responses were positive

#258 – More Prepared for My Calling

This course reaffirmed for me my strengths as a teacher and a human. It helped me look at some things I perceived as flaws, and instead, see them as strengths or at least an opportunity for a strength to be built. I realized because of this course that I do in fact have tons of support from my family, and that my role as a teacher is not just a career, but a calling. As a result, I feel more prepared to begin this new school year, and more equipped to deal with obstacles and challenges as they inevitably come my way. I am more hopeful for this year, for me, and my students.





Final Review

What Do YOU want to remember?

How will you remember it?

You'll be awake tonight anyway, so try 3GTs



You Can Help

Flood the AI Zone

PJW_CAPE

Follow our Linkedin

PJW_CAPE

Happiness for Educators

PJW_CAPE

Visit our Website

PJW_CAPE

Follow our Facebook

PJW_CAPE

Follow our Instagram

Closing or Song

That Dog Don’t Hunt

Add and Grow Skills and Strengths





Bonus Slides

On Savoring and Gratitude

SAVORING

is an intentional focus on and lingering with pleasant/positive experiences



Let's recall something worth savoring

SAVORING

is the simplest PPI. . .but it's an effective intervention for depression. How could it possibly treat depression?



SAVORING

- It's not the dopamine
- It's emotional agency
- Savoring helps us feel a greater sense of emotional agency!



PPI #4: Gratitude

- Do you want to increase optimism, improve life satisfaction, be healthier, exercise more, and be happier?
- Weave intentional gratitude into your life!





Ideas for Practice

1. Who is someone in this room toward whom you feel appreciation and gratitude?
2. Why do you feel gratitude for them? Be specific!
3. Today, you could find this person and share your gratitude.
4. Or...you might write your own gratitude letter. Follow step 2 above and then call . . . Or?

