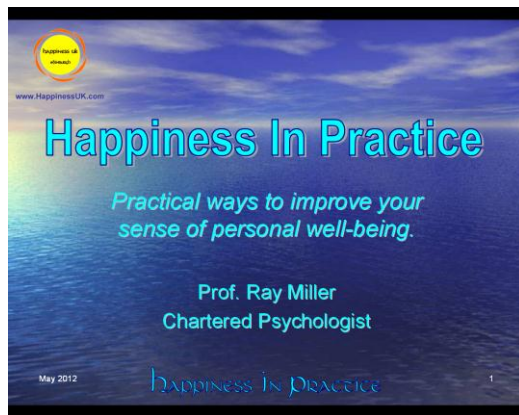




Practical ways to improve your sense of personal well-being.

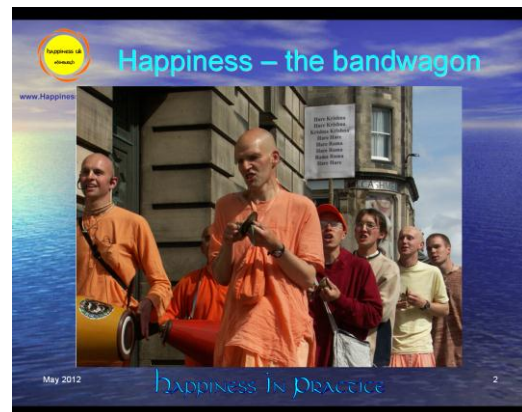
Prof. Ray Miller
Chartered Psychologist

Abbreviated script of a PowerPoint presentation to the Ragged University on 24 May 2012. The presentation and associated material can be downloaded from www.HappinessUK.com



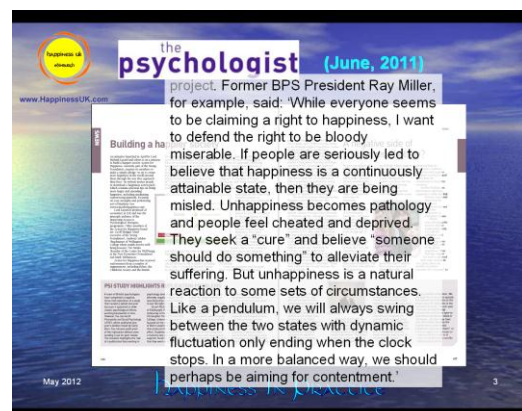
Good evening. Having spent 35 years working as a Clinical Psychologist in the National Health Service (NHS), most of that time in Adult Mental Health, I've seen more than my share of Unhappiness, Stress, Anxiety and Depression. I often wondered whether it was possible to use Psychology to prevent these problems rather than simply to treat them. To help people to live well rather than deal only with the consequences of life's down side.

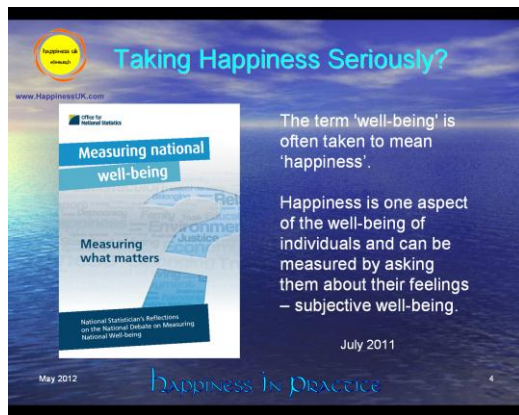
Given the title of my talk, it may surprise you to know that I'm not keen on the term 'Happiness'. For me it conjures up a particular picture, 'Hare Krishna on the Royal Mile'. Happiness is often sold as a 'peak' state of personal, spiritual and moral attainment: a vision of a higher level of being where we are immune to life's trials and tribulations. For me, and my patients, it needed to be something more down to earth and practical.



There's no shortage of advice. Hundreds of self help books in your local bookshop or on Amazon. Magazine articles and websites (including mine, www.HappinessUK.com), a World Happiness Day and the interesting organization Action for Happiness founded by Richard (Lord) Layard, author of 'Happiness: lessons from a new science'. We will hear more of him later. It all seems a bit of a bandwagon these days. Should we take it seriously?

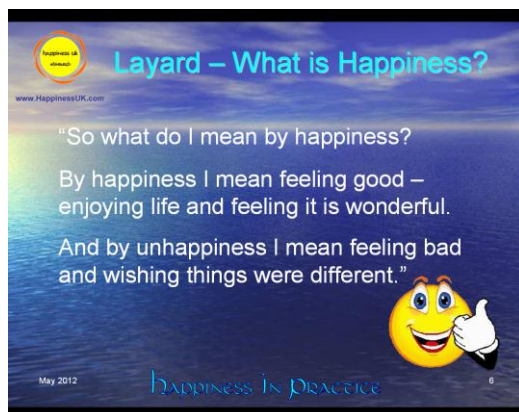
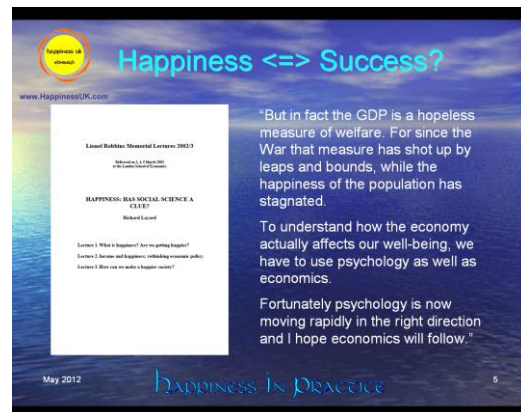
When Action for Happiness was launched on 12 April 2011 it was the subject of much media interest. The Psychologist (the magazine of The British Psychological Society) for example, quoted Past President Ray Miller, "While everyone seems to be claiming a right to happiness, I want to defend the right to be bloody miserable...unhappiness is a natural reaction to some sets of circumstances...we should perhaps be aiming for contentment."





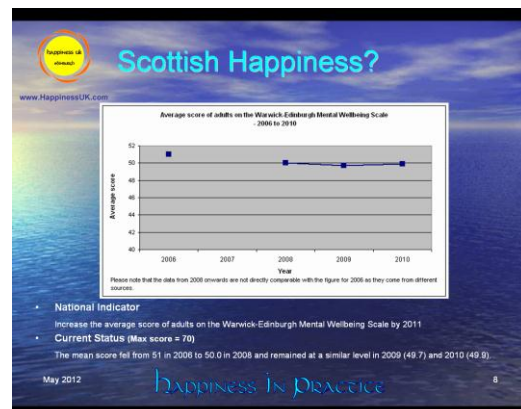
In July 2011 the Office of National Statistics produced a report on 'Measuring National Well-Being'. This is part of a Government initiative to attempt to measure how well we are doing as a nation. It recognises the need to consider how good we feel as well as how rich (or poor) we are if we want a meaningful and comprehensive picture. Looks like they are taking it seriously! I like the term 'well-being' as it describes something closer to 'contentment'.

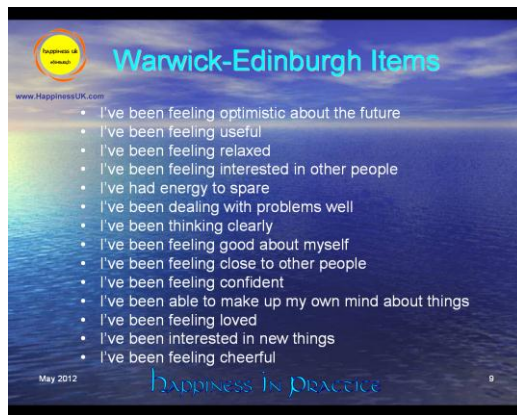
Why is Government interested? Remember Layard? In 2003 he gave a series of lectures proposing that 'Happiness' is an essential factor in the economic success of any nation. He suggested it tells us more than Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and we should take it seriously. He is a famous economist and was a friend of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. So they listened. Psychologists had said the same for years but no-one listens to them. Economists however... money talks!



Layard (who is really a rather nice guy for an economist – with his heart in the right place) had a pretty simple definition of what Happiness is. Psychologists would have made it much more complex. He also noted that Psychology knows quite a lot about what helps people to be happy but Psychologists are hard to come by and some of the ideas are so simple you don't need a Psychologist to make use of them. He wanted to make these ideas more accessible.

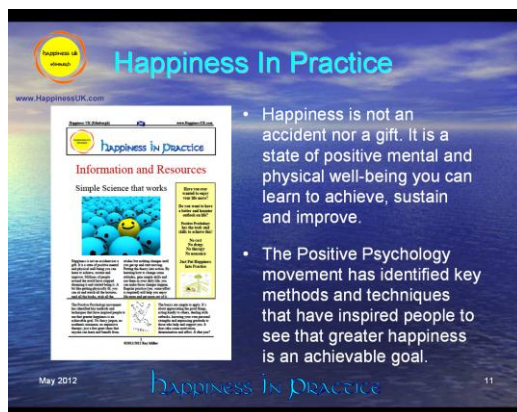
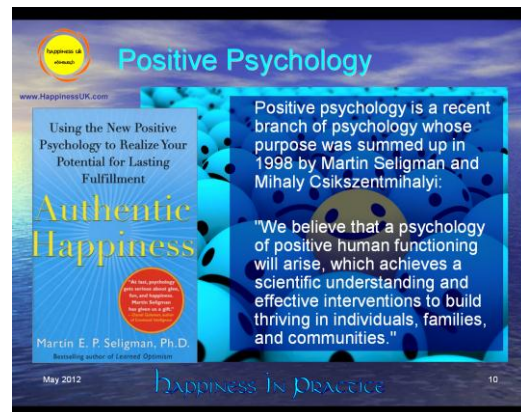
Interestingly, although the UK Government is just getting around to the idea, the Scottish Government has been measuring well-being since an initial pilot in 2006. From 2008 it has been a regular feature of the Annual Scottish Health Survey. It uses the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale. There are even targets for improving our well-being. Nice to know. Out of a possible score of 70 points, the current average is around 50. Not too bad.





It's interesting to look at the 14 items the scale uses to measure well-being. You can rate each on a 1–5 scale, giving the total possible 70. When you look at them, there is nothing extraordinary. No Lottery win, no fantasy, no magic: just ordinary, day to day feelings we can all recognise. Simple things that are important to us. Things that make us feel life can be good and worthwhile. Things we can actually do something about for ourselves.

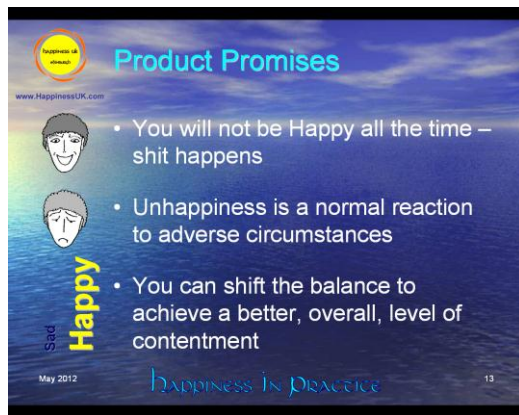
The idea that we can do simple things to improve Happiness for ourselves has been the focus of a movement called 'Positive Psychology'. Launched in 1998 by Prof Martin Seligman in the USA, it brings together much of the knowledge from Psychology of how we can improve on our sense of well-being. Like Layard, Seligman believed it was better to be proactive. He too felt many of the ideas were simple yet effective. Research has proved his point.



In 2011, a colleague, Paul Newton, and I ran a course in Edinburgh, one evening a week over 5 weeks, showing how some of the key ideas from the Positive Psychology research could be learned and used. It was well attended and the participants reported real benefits. Indeed, some have gone on to use the materials to run their own courses. It's that simple. Happiness is a state of positive mental and physical well-being you can learn to achieve, sustain and improve.

You too can benefit from the techniques we taught and discussed on that course. So if you want to enjoy life more, feel more positive and use methods that are simple but proven in many research studies then you can do it. No gain without effort though. These are skills, not magic. You have to practice to improve like any skill. But the skills are not hard to master, it's free, no medication, no psychotherapy and no need to sign up to weird beliefs.





So what do you get? There are no false promises. No guarantee of 'Happy Ever After'. This is real life and it doesn't always run smoothly. Things do go wrong and feeling Unhappy is a normal reaction when they do. In fact sometimes it is the feeling of Unhappiness that makes you look closely at your life and make changes. But you can have a much better balance with more Happiness and less Unhappiness. Again that word 'Contentment'.

There are 5 key skills I'm going to recommend to you, based on the research. There could be more, but I did say I would keep it simple. You can add more later if you want. Action for Happiness has 10 key skills so I've already cut your work in half. I'm asking you to PAUSE for a moment and take time to *Practice* Appreciation, perform Acts of Kindness, *Use* your Strengths, deal with Setbacks and Resilience and *Express* Gratitude.



Appreciation. We take so much for granted. Our health, the fact that we have food to eat, a roof over our heads, family, friends, loved ones. We forget the beauty of a sunny day or flowers in the park. The kind word and the smile. But we certainly remember the things that upset us! We brood over them in our minds until they fuel anger and despair. Let's not forget the good things. Let's look out for and record them. Let's get our perspective back into a better balance.

So often we look only for Happiness in the big things. If I had more money, a better job, a nicer house, more friends... Yet, as author Robert Brault reminds us, Happiness is often the accumulation of little things. The evidence from research shows that big, material gains often have little effect on Happiness. Happiness is the ability to live in the moment and enjoy its pleasures. Happiness isn't getting what you want but appreciating what you've got.





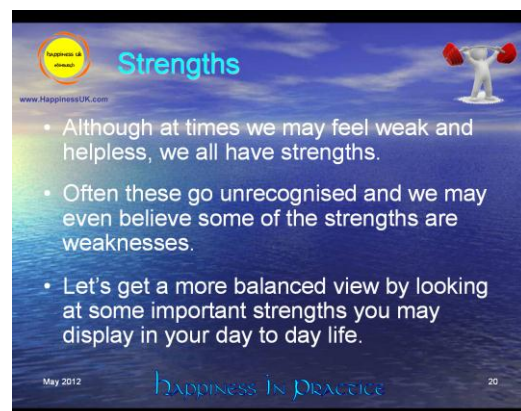
What sorts of things? Have a look at the list in this slide, taken from suggestions made by people who have been looking at their own daily lives. I'm sure you can find some that would apply to you too. In fact, this is just a small selection from hundreds that people recorded once they started looking. One person described it as 'like suddenly having your radar switched on'. So many things we never notice yet we'd certainly notice if they weren't there!

Kindness. It's great to feel useful. Doing something for someone else often gives us a sense of fulfilment and purpose. We feel good about ourselves because we have done something good. A friend once asked how to help a depressed colleague. "Ask them to do something to help you", I suggested. Engaging in positive action and feeling useful helped their mood. And Kindness spreads. Be Kind to someone and they feel good as well and may be Kinder in turn.



Does it have to be something big? Not at all. Life is full of opportunities for Random Acts of Kindness. You just have to be on the lookout. I like to try to be kind and considerate to other drivers when I'm on the road. It makes the journey smoother for me too. Here in Edinburgh there are often opportunities to help tourists find their way and cheerfully point them in the right direction. Smiling and saying "Good morning" to a shop assistant. Simple.

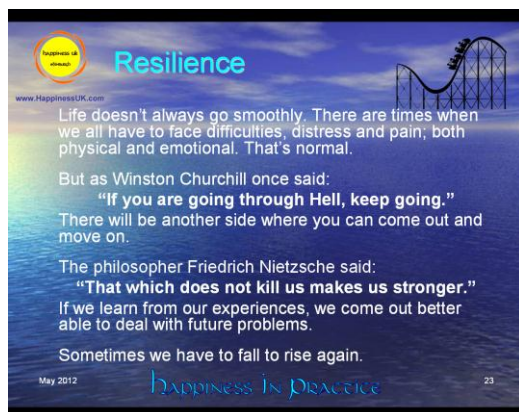
Strengths. When we are Unhappy, it often seems as though we just don't have what it takes to cope. We look at our failures and weaknesses and may feel helpless. But we all have Strengths too. Sometimes we forget how much we *can* do. We take for granted some of the skills we have. We may even see some negatively. The person with good empathy sees their distress at the pain of other as weakness when the ability to relate to the emotions of others is highly positive.





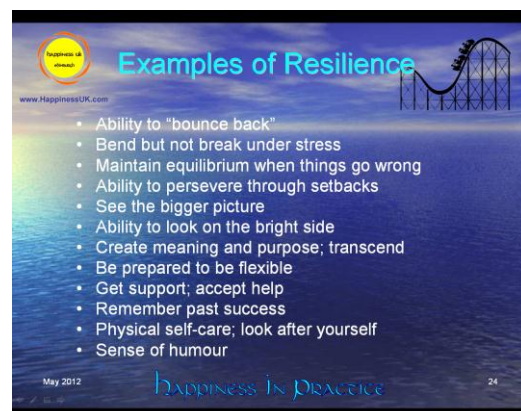
Like the other areas we have looked at, Strengths are often simple attributes we take for granted. Have a look at the list on this slide. These are just a small selection from those that people have considered to be important. I'm pretty sure we can all find at least a few that fit our own experience. The fact that you are looking at this presentation, for example, shows that you are interested in learning, have curiosity and, of course, good judgement.

I mentioned earlier Martin Seligman, one of the originators of the Positive Psychology movement. He is the author of several books on the topic and one, 'Authentic Happiness', has lent its title to the name of the Positive Psychology website. You can register there free and access a whole range of tests and questionnaires that will help you explore your Strengths and other attributes. It also keeps a private record of changes over time.



Resilience. Life is a roller coaster and dealing positively with the ups and downs is the key to enjoying the ride. Sometimes you will be down but it is important to remember that the ride will rise again. However Unhappy one day is, there will be others that are better. And, as I said before, sometimes we need Unhappiness to move us forward; to promote change. No one seems to remember the song 'Pick Yourself Up, Dust Yourself Off', must be my age.

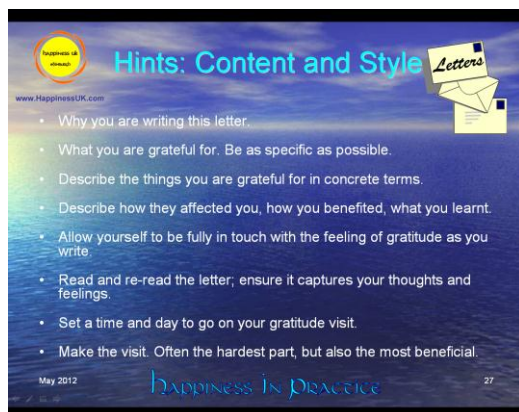
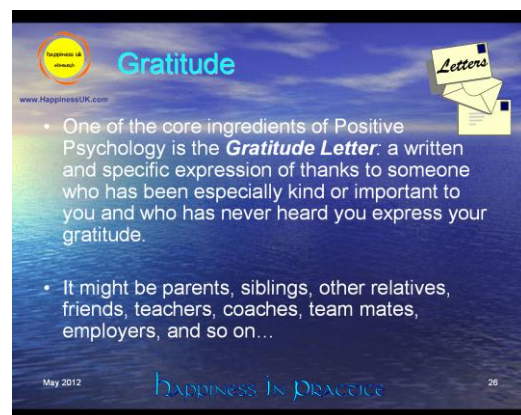
'Just you remember those famous men, who had to fall to rise again, so pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start all over again'. I remember being told "If you've never failed then you haven't been trying hard enough." Life doesn't always go to plan. We need attitudes and approaches that help us carry on. We learn lessons and improve our skills. As with the other key areas, Resilience requires practice. Try to see how some of the attitudes listed here could apply to you.





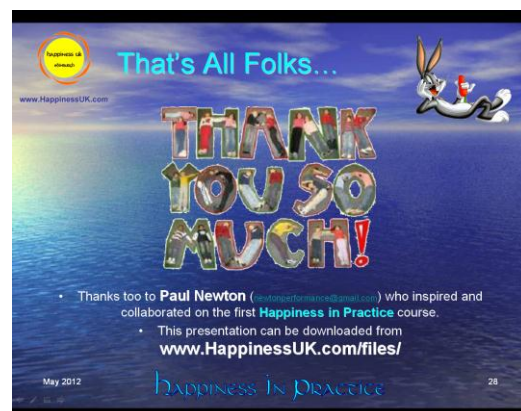
There are some common characteristics of people who develop Resilience. They are all helpful but one of the most important is good, strong, supportive relationships. These may be family, friends or even colleagues. Sometimes the load just needs to be shared. Belief in yourself is important too. It's good to think of past successes and times when you have overcome difficulties. Often a sense of humour helps and that may include the ability to laugh at yourself.

Gratitude. When we reflect on our lives, we can often identify people who have played a key role in our progress. Perhaps it was the teacher who inspired us at school, the relative who helped us find our philosophy of life, the parent who supported us when the going was tough financially. Often we never really get round to telling them how much it meant. Yet research shows that saying 'Thank You' is a powerful, positive experience.



You might think it was mainly good for the person being thanked, but writing, and delivering, a Gratitude Letter has been shown to have a powerful effect on the sender too. The ideal is to read it to the recipient personally. Sometimes difficult but often deeply moving. Even where the person may be far away, sending the letter counts. In fact some have even been written to people who are no longer living and created closure though undelivered.

And that's it! As promised, nothing too difficult, too fancy nor too academic. Just simple, proven techniques that you can easily follow and that will improve with practice. My thanks to you for your interest and to Paul Newton for collaborating on the first course. You can find this presentation, a self help booklet summarising the course and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale on my website along with other useful information and links.



Happiness – don't dream it, be it!