

Florida State University College of Law

## Scholarship Repository

---

Scholarly Publications

---

2003

### Taking Inventory: The Science of Happiness

Lawrence S. Krieger

*Florida State University College of Law*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.law.fsu.edu/articles>



Part of the [Legal Profession Commons](#), and the [Psychology Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Lawrence S. Krieger, *Taking Inventory: The Science of Happiness*, 20 *GPSOLO* 66 (2003),  
Available at: <https://ir.law.fsu.edu/articles/98>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarly Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [efarrell@law.fsu.edu](mailto:efarrell@law.fsu.edu).

## TAKING INVENTORY: THE SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS

By Lawrence S. Krieger



**W**ith all the talk these days about unhappy or unhealthy lawyers, it's easy to ignore over-used words such as "balance," "stress," and "overwork." But without question, real challenges to personal happiness and career satisfaction accompany the opportunities offered by law school and law practice. Let's skip the buzzwords and take a fresh look at life quality from a modern, scientific viewpoint.

Psychology has taken a turn in the past 15 years or so, moving away from an exclusive interest in illness to focus on human strengths, virtues, and well-being. The picture of wellness that emerges from modern research offers an opportunity for self-evaluation. As I describe the researched components of life satisfaction below, try

to apply the information to both the professional and personal aspects of your life. Ideally, create a brief written inventory of each component.

### Motivation, Goals, and Values

First, ask yourself: What motivates me? What are the values and goals that I care the most about? These might include having a thriving law practice, enjoying vacations or hobbies, earning lots of money, finding a life partner, having a deep religious life, or being a central part of your family, church, or community activities. On a separate sheet list your *most primary* goals and values, then read on.

Research has shown that the source of these goals and values will impact your happiness: Well-being tends to accompany "intrinsic" primary goals and values, such as self-improvement, close relationships, community, and social betterment. On the other hand, "extrinsic" goals—such as financial affluence, luxury, power, and image—consistently produce decreased satisfaction and well-being. Note the intrinsic or extrinsic nature of the goals and values you listed.

The next, and quite related, question is: *Why* are you

*Lawrence S. Krieger is a clinical professor at Florida State University College of Law, where he conducts research on the effects of law school and on the values and well-being of law students. For a bibliography of books, articles, and studies on this topic, see his website, [www.law.fsu.edu/academic\\_programs/humanizing\\_lawschool.php](http://www.law.fsu.edu/academic_programs/humanizing_lawschool.php).*

motivated toward each of your primary goals and values? Is it because (1) you enjoy the activity itself (i.e., doing day-to-day practice of law, playing tennis, going to church)? (2) You feel the activity is an inherently important thing to do, in keeping with your personal value system? (3) The activity provides you rewards, such as money, approval, or status? (4) You would feel guilty or anxious if you didn't do this activity? (5) Someone else wants you to or thinks you should undertake this activity?

To continue your written inventory, note which of these five typical motivations relates most to each of your listed goals and values. Now note whether these motivations are intrinsic or extrinsic. The first two motivations are considered intrinsic reasons for choosing an action; they will most often be associated with a sense of rightness, well-being, and thriving. Reasons three through five are considered extrinsic motivators; actions chosen for these reasons are generally accompanied by the experience of frustration, irritation, or stress.

### Fundamental Needs

Next, you need to see whether your basic needs are being met. Look first at the usual balance and stress issues: If you're not getting sufficient sleep or quality meals, or if you feel stressed or pressed much of the time, make a note of it. Either of these situations strongly predicts emotional and/or physical health problems to come. Don't ignore the situation—make a plan and you could save your life. Better yet, seek a counselor or coach to help with that plan.

Beyond these basic physical needs, psychological research has now identified other universal needs:

- Self-esteem: self-respect, the sense of having positive qualities
- Relatedness: closeness, intimacy, feeling well-connected with others
- Authenticity: choices based on true values/interests, expressing your true self
- Autonomy: the ability to make your own choices, to do things as you prefer
- Competence: feeling very capable, able to master challenges and difficult tasks
- Security: comfortable routines/habits, life feels predictable and safe from threat

The presence of these experiences reliably provides a sense of meaning, happiness, and thriving in life, while their absence produces angst, depression, and loss of vitality. Further, if you are deprived in any of these areas or are lacking in intrinsic values and motives, you are particularly vulnerable to the problems of overwork and distress common among lawyers today.

In your written evaluation of the needs listed above, be as honest as you can about the frequency and intensity of each experience in your work and personal life. Note that your choice of solo or small firm practice is a definite advantage for your potential autonomy, authen-

ticity, and self-esteem, but it may also present challenges to security and, for solos, relatedness at work. Your sense of competence may also feel challenged if you too often practice outside your field of familiarity.

Review your inventory up to this point. You should notice a strong correlation between the nature of your goals and the fulfillment of your needs: the more *intrinsic* your goals, the more likely the pursuit of these goals will satisfy your needs. For example, if you practice law because you want to help others and/or because you genuinely enjoy the process of working through your cases, your needs for self-esteem, relatedness, authenticity, and autonomy will likely be supported by your work. On the other hand, if you are mainly driven by the "bottom line" or to create a powerful/affluent image, the actions you choose in pursuit of those goals are more likely to undermine your needs for self-esteem, relatedness, authenticity, and autonomy.

### Optimism Versus Pessimism

Finally, think about whether you tend to view life in general, and setbacks in particular, in positive or negative ways. An optimist will habitually brush off setbacks, taking them as temporary facts of life without much meaning. Pessimists do just the opposite: To them, setbacks reveal a personal problem that may have generalized negative effects across their life and that may continue to produce problems into the future. Not surprisingly, research shows that pessimism predicts depression and a shorter, less healthy life than optimism.

### Tallying Your Results

It's hardly surprising that modern empirical research agrees with traditional wisdom: Following your conscience, maintaining absolute integrity, keeping a cheerful outlook, helping others, and building community will make you feel good about your life and work. Conversely, pushing primarily for money and power, or seeing the worst in people and situations—a habit many of us acquire in law school and practice—can undermine your life experience. If your list was mostly about extrinsic values and motivators, or you saw that you are not meeting your true needs, why not adopt more satisfying goals and motives? There are numerous books, programs, coaches, counselors, and clergy that can help you. Use them—just as you would want someone with a legal problem to use your services. And if you recognized signs of pessimism or negative mindset, you can, and should, change that pattern of thinking. Start by reading Martin E. P. Seligman's *Learned Optimism* or *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, or Susan Jeffers's *End the Struggle and Dance With Life: How to Build Yourself Up When the World Gets You Down*. If your inventory tilted toward the intrinsic, satisfied, and optimistic, take a nice breath and know that scientific research is supporting your choices. 