

Shrink Rap Radio #270: Unlocking Psychological Wealth
David Van Nuys, Ph.D. interviews Robert Biswas-Diener, Ph.D
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Jeremy Devens)

Introduction: Are you as wealthy as you'd like to be? What if I told you that greater wealth is easily within your grasp? Now you're probably thinking about your bank account, perhaps your investments that you either have or you don't have, or maybe the state of the economy, but I'm not talking about money, there's another kind of wealth. Psychological wealth. I'm thinking about Mother Theresa, and when she visited this country, the US, and of course Mother Theresa worked with the poorest of the poor in Bangladesh, yet when she came to America, she found us to be a very lonely people, which she described as a kind of leprosy. We might think of it as a kind of poverty.

So one component of psychological wealth, and a very important one, would be a rich network of relationships. Another might be resilience, the ability to bounce back after adversity. And another might be knowing your personal strengths and exercising them. Yet another might be a sense of purpose, feeling like your life fits into some larger scheme of things. These are the sorts of issues being explored by positive psychology. Positive psychologists are interested in exploring scientifically the factors that lead to human flourishing, as well as practical applications for improving our psychological well being.

Today's guest is well qualified to talk about these issues. He's Dr Robert Biswas-Diener and he's widely known as the Indian Jones of positive psychology. His research on happiness has taken him to such far flung places as Greenland, India and Kenya.

Along with his father Ed Diener, Robert is co-author of the book Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth.

Let's go to the interview.

Dr. Dave: Dr Robert Biswas-Diener, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio

Biswas-Diener: Thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Dave: Well I'm so pleased to have this opportunity to speak with you. I'm particularly interested in the book that you wrote with your father Ed Diener. You two wrote a book together on happiness. In the book you talk about unlocking psychological wealth. What do you mean by that term?

Biswas-Diener: Good question. Psychological wealth, it's kind of a concept we just came up with, like many of these concepts, it's not a hard and fast truth that you find out in the world. We just thought that in the modern age, when people are pursuing other forms of wealth, principally financial wealth, it would be good to expand what our definition of real wealth is, to include what we call psychological wealth. Which would be a more consummate type of wealth. It could include having material sufficiency and goods and services available to you, but it also includes being spiritually fit, being emotionally happy, being connected to others. It's probably what the ancient Greeks would have called 'the good life.'

Dr. Dave: Yeah, and it's an accessible concept that I think is easy to understand, because certainly money isn't the only kind of wealth that we have. It kind of brings to mind that I've heard in Bhutan and maybe France that there's a 'Gross National Happiness.' It seems like people in other places are sort of reaching for a similar concept.

Biswas-Diener: Absolutely, in fact it's been a pretty interesting trend economically. The traditional measures of economical well being or things like 'do you live a long life?' Does the country you live in basically provide enough nutrition, security and so forth, to make sure that you live to a ripe old age? But those kind of measures have said very little about the quality of life. Obviously we don't want longevity if

it's a long and hard life, or a long and boring life, or a long and meaningless life.

So, recently, some economists and other people from the social sciences, have really taken up the banner in terms of 'let's add some new measures to our understand of well-being' and find out more about people's subjective experience. Not just 'do kids do well in school' but 'do they enjoy the experience of learning as they do well.' Not just 'do people live long lives' but 'do they live long *meaningful* lives?' and so forth.

Dr. Dave: And I know that you and other scientists, particularly within Positive Psychology have gone about studying the factors that seem to underlie and lead to happiness and to satisfaction as one approaches the end of their life. What about in terms of the application, and for listeners, how does one go about unlocking their psychological wealth? Have we found out things that help moves us in that direction

Biswas-Diener: (Laughs) That's a good question, and probably a question of burning interest for listeners, but it's also a big question. Again, looking at psychological wealth, it's a bit like having a full financial portfolio. You don't just have a bank savings account. You don't just have stocks and bonds. You don't just have a retirement account. You have all of these things, and each one, by diversifying, helps protect you against slumps in the economy, losing your job, or any number of factors that could go wrong.

We think that the concept of psychological wealth is much the same way. I think it's fine to work on your relationships with others and connect. We're social animals and that's going to be a huge source of happiness for you. I think it's fine to have a little bit of hedonism, a little bit of enjoyment of your food, of sex and sexuality, of recreation, and that's gonna help you. I think it's good to have some material sufficiency. Feel psychologically secure and not necessarily feel like at any moment you could be homeless. Flex your spiritual muscles. Feel connected to a higher sense of purpose and meaning. In this way, you

can kind of diversify your overall well being, so that if you take a setback, if you take a hit where a friendship is concerned, or where your stock portfolio is concerned, you'll still be able to buffer against that psychological sting by having other forms of wealth available to you, if that makes sense.

Dr. Dave: It does make sense, and in fact it sounds very common sensical, but I gather that there's actually scientific research that supports the value of the things that you just spoke about, for example the value of strong relationships and so on.

Biswas-Diener: Absolutely, and if you look, for example, at a comparison between the happiest people and the least happy people and you say 'What separates these two groups?' It's not that one group is educated and the other is not, one is wealthy and the other is not, you know, one group is men and the other is not.

What separates these two groups is that the happiest people have good intimate, solid, trusting social relationships. Those who are in the least happy group, they struggle with their relationships, they don't necessarily feel like they have people they can rely on, that they can turn to, in both good times and in bad.

So the social relationship aspect of happiness isn't just important, it's actually crucial. It's one of the most important factors in happiness.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, you know, we so often are described as a social animal, and it seems like maybe that's the main thing, not the only one, but maybe that's the main factor.

Biswas-Diener: A lot of people certainly say that, people in the know with research expertise. A common phrase that's bandied about Positive Psychology circles is the statement "other people matter," and you find this in so many different studies. When you donate money to charity, it repays you in happiness dividends.

Dr. Dave: Yeah

Biswas-Diener: When you donate money to a stranger. When you do any kind of pro-social spending, it benefits you. When you donate your time to charity. When you help strangers. When you spend time with those you love. When you're anticipating getting together with those you love.

Across the board, these social relationships, whether they're strangers or close friends and family, they *really* reap a huge amount of meaning and emotional happiness for us.

Dr. Dave: I'm remembering a study that I read about where subjects were given the opportunity to either hand out a dollar or five dollars a day for a period of time, or do something that was "pleasurable" or gratifying to them, hedonistic, if you will, and as I recall, the results were that they actually got a deeper sense of satisfaction from just giving away a relatively small amount of money. It makes me think that maybe if one just randomly gave away a dollar a day, it might be a better investment in their happiness than a membership in a gym lets say.

Biswas-Diener: (Laughs) That's a really interesting point. There are other studies that show other benefits besides what we think of as happiness, just feeling good. When people on dodgeball teams, in one study, had the choice to spend money on their team members rather than on themselves, they actually won more games, and when members of a pharmaceuticals sales team have the opportunity to spend money on their team members rather than themselves, they actually make more sales.

So it's not just that spending money on others will necessarily boost your performance, but it really helps you work together in a way that is improved. So there's a social benefit as well as the personal emotional benefit.

Dr. Dave: That's fascinating, I haven't heard of either of those two studies. Speaking of money though, Positive Psychology is only about 12 years old formally, and I know some of the earlier studies on

happiness haven't been borne out. One thing that comes to mind is the relationship between the amount of money one earns and happiness. Bring us up to date on that if you will.

Biswas-Diener: Money, I'll just say, is certainly not the most important factor in happiness. How good your genetic predisposition is, some people are just dialed in a bit happier, that's more important. Your social relationships are more important. Seeking and finding meaning at your work is more important. All these factors are more important, yet the issue of money has received the lion's share of the attention.

Dr. Dave: It's not surprising given our preoccupation with money.

Biswas-Diener: (Laughs) In some ways it's easier to measure. We have good measures of income. Economists have been measuring this in every country in the world. So it's really easy to get at these external factors, and it's a little bit harder to say, you know, "What's the role of resilience to happiness?" Because both of them are psychological constructs and therefore, they're measurable, but more difficult to measure than "did you get a pay raise" or "do you have x amount of money in savings" and so forth.

So to answer your question, the relationship between money and happiness exists, there is a relationship and I think I differ from some of my colleagues on how to interpret that. So, we know there's a small relationship.

Some people say 'Well the relationship is small, therefore money doesn't really matter,' and others say 'The relationship exists, it's significant and therefore it doesn't matter as much as other stuff, but it still makes a difference.' So here's my kind of 'take home' where money is concerned.

Money definitely affects your happiness. Especially at the group level. So, take for example, living in a rich, affluent country like Denmark or Canada or the United States of America. Being a citizen of these rich countries actually benefits you because a lot of the money, the wealth,

sort of percolates out into societal goodness. That is, we tend to have relatively non-corrupt police forces. We tend to have good green spaces and public parks. We have good infrastructure. We have relatively good health care. We're pretty free of things like civil war. So, at the societal level, societies really seem to benefit from being wealthy.

Now, once you go down to the individual level, you're just *you* living in Canada or Denmark or Zimbabwe for that matter. Then money matters a bit less. You could have an unhappy rich person or a happy rich person and just the same you could have a happy poor person or an unhappy poor person, and it's not necessarily the money that's going to make the biggest difference to whether they're happy or not.

Dr. Dave: What about lottery winners? I've seen a lot of shows about unhappy lottery winners. People who won a ton of money and their life became a shambles. So that's sort of the image that a lot of us have now.

Biswas-Diener: We certainly do have some sort of classic studies with regard to the lottery winners, principally from England, from winning sports lotteries, and there's lots of highly publicized cases of mega-million lottery winners. One of the problems for such "lucky" people is that what you have is a huge upset in their life circumstances, and any time you upset someone's life circumstances, where you just completely change their world, it's gonna take some adaptation. It's gonna be a little bit difficult. Even difficult to adapt to that new mansion, the new house and the lawn with it, the relatives that are hitting you up for money (laughs) you know, all these types of things; people who want to kidnap you or extort money, which happened in a couple of cases where the person's house was continually broken into.

So, lotteries aren't probably the *best* way of gauging the impact of money, just because it's such an unusual, and almost bizarre circumstance.

When you look at just very wealthy people. Very wealthy people report being pretty happy. We would all secretly kind of like to think maybe

Bill Gates is miserable or something, just a bit of shadenfreud there. (laughs), but the truth is when you have money it allows you to pursue your goals, it gives you a sense of psychological security, it can help you live out your values, and a lot of people, even those who are very wealthy, and Bill Gates is probably a good example of this, *do* live out their values with their money. Obviously, he's as famous now for his humanitarian work as he is for Windows. If you think about a much more 'human' scale of wealth. If you had another 10, 20, \$30,000, I'm not sure that would completely 'guarantee' you some type of bliss, but certainly it would allow you to do things like help send your grandkids to college, take your family on a trip, and things that are actually not very selfish, that are not just, you know, buying a sports car for yourself, actually we're very pro-social and connecting with the people whom you love.

Dr. Dave: Now, I hear you've been called the Indiana Jones of Positive Psychology, what's that about? Where does that moniker come from?

Biswas-Diener: (Laughs) Well, let me just go on record here and say I did not come up with that. Like all nicknames, you can't assign one to yourself. My colleague Chris Peterson at University of Michigan first coined that term and I'm both tickled by it and sometimes slightly embarrassed by it (laughs).

Really that reputation came about because much of the research I've done has been pretty divergent from the types of research you often find in psychology. That is to say, most psychologists work within the university setting, and they have a research laboratory on campus and they broaden largely college students through a variety of laboratory tasks. This is certainly a decent way to get to know about human psychology, but of course not the only way.

I've taken a different route, that has far more in common with anthropology. So I've gotten out of the laboratory, away from the university and I've had the extraordinary opportunity to work with groups long overlooked by psychologist. I've lived with the Amish, I've

stayed with seal hunters near the North Pole in the very northern tip of Greenland, I've stayed with the [Masai tribal people in Kenya](#), I've worked with Israeli and Palestinian peace workers, sex workers in Calcutta. Some really interesting groups that you don't typically think of when you think of your average psychological study.

Dr. Dave: Well talk about psychological wealth! It seems to me like you've got some real psychological wealth in your life, in terms of the rich diversity of people that you've managed to study and hang out with.

You've mentioned in a YouTube video I saw that one of your greatest strengths is story telling. So I'm going to ask you to relate to us a couple of stories of discovery as a result of your travels and living with other kinds of people. What stands out?

Biswas-Diener: Sure, I'd be happy to. One of the interesting things about happiness, and I'm going to tell you a story in just a second, that happened in the slums in south Calcutta in India, but one of the interesting things about happiness is people think of it in terms of the *present moment*, you know, you eat a bowl of chocolate ice cream and you kind of feel good now, or you gaze into the eyes of the person you love and right this second you feel this intense love, and happiness is a sort of 'in the moment' sensation.

The truth is we have this wonderful capacity as humans to remember the past and also anticipate the future. Happiness becomes a bit more complex, and we can actually experience happiness *from* the past and mine it. Mine past experience, just like being a gold miner, and bring it, *drag it* into the present and *experience it* right now, live, in the present. Even though it's from an experience in the past.

So, a few years ago, I was in the slums, doing work with people who live in very dire circumstances. They face constant threat of eviction, developers are always angling for their land, the sanitary conditions are absolutely deplorable, they sometimes suffer police harassment, it's overcrowded, they have no good toilet facilities, I mean just really not

desirable places to live, and I was interviewing a young girl named Putawl and I was asking her ‘Well what are you good at?’ you know, because I sometimes ask ‘What makes you happy?’ and I know it’s not all bad here, let’s talk about a few of the good things. So I said ‘What are you good at Putawl?’

She said “I’m really fast.”

It’s a little kid answer, you know, she’s not talking about character traits or anything, she just said “I’m a fast runner.” So, I’m a bit competitive, and I teased her and I said “You think you’re faster than me? Could you beat me in a race?” and she said “Oh, definitely. I definitely could.” (laughs) and then I said “Well let’s go race!” and we stood up, we put my clipboard down, stopped the interview, and of course as we walk down this muddy foot path up to the main road, word spread like wildfire through the slum area, and such a crowded area that there were literally something like 1,000 people lining the sides of the roads by the time Putawl and I gained access to the motorway.

Dr. Dave: Wonderful.

Biswas-Diener: Yeah, it’s like this impromptu Olympics, right? The taxi drivers actually blocked traffic. They stopped traffic with their taxis, and they really made a spectacle out of all this. Had I known, I’m not sure I would have challenged her to the race.

Dr. Dave: I was wondering if you were starting to feel some pressure (laughs)

Biswas-Diener: I definitely was feeling pressure, because, you know, you don’t want to beat a little kid in a race in front of everybody. So I would take the strategy that I gave it some effort, but I don’t want to humiliate her. So we started, and we pointed to a taxi very far away and said “let’s race to that” and we took off running. And I will tell you, this kid, so unbelievably fast. I mean (laughs), I said my strategy was gonna be to go a little bit slow to make her feel good about herself, uh, I was

not worried about her self esteem anymore (laughs) I was worried about mine.

I mean, unbelievably fast. I was running as hard as I could and she could totally keep abreast with me, the entire way. Then I was like ‘wait, she’s really gonna smoke me! She’s gonna just race right by me.’ And when we got about 5 meters away from the finish line, it turns out that she actually had been employing the strategy that I had just mentioned. She had been running slow to help my self esteem.

Dr. Dave: (Laughs)

Biswas-Diener: And that realization was just *crushing*. When we got about 5 meters away, she took off as if we were just standing still. I could just tell, so obviously, that she had been holding all her strength in reserve. She *easily* won the race, and when she touched her hand to that taxi cab, these *thousand* spectators; her family, her community members, the strangers, the tea hockers on the side of the road just *erupted* in unison and this *enormous* cheer as Putawl ran with both arms raised, like this huge victory lap with a giant smile on her face.

It was such an interesting moment to me, because here’s this kid that lives in such awful circumstances, so proud, just *beaming*. She ran over and hugged her parents who were so proud of her, and I found that *I* was smiling, even though I was sort of the loser, right. (Laughs) I was the object that had been beaten, they were celebrating my defeat, and I found that *I* had this ear-to-ear grin. What’s so interesting about is *I know* both for Putawl and for myself, this happened years ago, and even right now as I tell the story, I feel the same sense of happiness, the novelty, the fun and the enjoyment of it, and I know that Putawl can also draw on her past experience and bring that, just drag it kicking and screaming right in to the present to experience the same sense of happiness, and there’s a contagious element.

Dr. Dave: I was just going to say that, because I’m feeling it too!

Biswas-Diener: Exactly. That's one of the things that I love about. This is something that happened, I think, in 2008, in Calcutta, between me and a little girl, and I say it here to you today, and *you* feel some of that happiness, and you feel it as viscerally and as real and as emotionally present *right now* as if you were there that day. And I think that this is sort of an under appreciated aspect of happiness. That we have this huge reservoir of past positive experience, all of us, that we can be tapping into and sharing, and sort of raising the net tonnage of happiness in the world.

Dr. Dave: That's wonderful. I'm smiling even as I hear this. And I saw you've been working with someone else who I've interviewed, Roko Belic, who is a movie director who made one of my favorite films *Genghis Blues*. [His film Happy is out now](#), and I guess he's been following you around or somehow integrating some of your work into his film?

Biswas-Diener: Absolutely, Roko is a dear friend of mine. He's an amazing, amazing film maker. The new film, he *really* said 'how can we do something new on happiness that just hasn't been done before' and 'how do you show it visually.' And his real question, he said 'we understand the science, and so sure, I can take my camera and go interview Ed Diener or Marty Seligman or any number of happiness experts, but we need to really tell the story of happiness, and to do that you need to put a human face on it.' So Roko I think had the wisdom, the foresight to actually just try and go find happiness stories from everyday people. One of the people he came with me, in fact, was the slums of south Calcutta, where he interviewed a hand rickshaw puller. Calcutta's one of the only places left in the world where people still trod along with these rickshaws, pulling them by hand.

Dr. Dave: And there's [a clip of that on YouTube](#). Wonderful clip. Go ahead and tell that story.

Biswas-Diener: Yeah, exactly. The guy, Menoj is his name, he lives like I described before, in just these absolutely terrible conditions, you know,

mosquitos everywhere, monsoon rains flooding his house, he just has this sort of ramshackle bamboo structure house, it's overcrowded, 200 people use a single hand pump to get water. Just awful living conditions. And this guy was so happy. He had such modest needs and desires. He did worry a little bit for his children, he wanted them to have a better life than he did, like a parent anywhere, but beyond that, he really was able to appreciate the time he had with his children, and the connection he had with them. It seemed to not only buffer him against the dire effects of poverty, but actually to instill him with a real sort of inner peace and warmth. I think he claimed at one point to feel very sort of psychologically rich, despite his actual poverty.

Dr. Dave: That sure is what came across in that YouTube video. I really want to encourage people to see Happy.

Now we mentioned that you're the Indiana Jones of Positive Psychology, and your dad has been called the Jedi Master of Positive Psychology, does that also come from Chris Peterson? (Laughs)

Biswas-Diener: I think it may be indicative of too many nicknames in the field (laughs).

Dr. Dave: It made me think that maybe I need to get your guys' PR firm. Maybe I could become the James Bond of Psychology Podcasting (laughs)

Biswas-Diener: Exactly, exactly (laughs).

Dr. Dave: So your dad, Ed Diener, he's one of the shining lights of Positive Psychology. I think he's been studying happiness for 30 years, which would actually pre-date the formal designation of Positive Psychology, right?

Biswas-Diener: Definitely, and it pre-dates it by about 2 decades. Yeah, I'm enormously proud of my father, I've done lots of collaboration with him. It's interesting, it's like I grew up with Robert DeNiro or Brad Pitt or someone who's truly, truly famous as my father, but within

psychology certainly he's well known. I get the funniest set of questions, you know, one of the most common questions I get is people ask me, sort of with a frown on their face they say 'Robert, how is it growing up in the *shadow* of such a great man?' you know, as if my father is the most oppressive thing that's ever happened to me. And truth be told, quite the opposite is what I've experienced. He's extraordinary. He's such an outside the box thinker that way back in the 1980's he was studying de-individuation, crowd behavior, how you get swept up in a crowd and you're more likely to lose your inhibitions and do acts of violence or vandalism, you know, something that you could call fairly negative psychology, and he just said, you know, 'I'm gonna take a chance and study' what he called 'subjective well being' 'I'm gonna study happiness. I want to find out when people are at their best, and how culture effect it, what income has to do with it, who's happy, when, what makes people happy, what are the limits of happiness?' And I think he was quite courageous academically in doing so, and it turned out to be a great success for him, but I don't think it was without risk. So I feel extraordinarily proud, and it was great to grow up with someone who is such an intellectual powerhouse. You know, every dinner we had was just peppered with new ideas about research. It was wonderful.

Dr. Dave: Well, compounded, I guess by the fact that your mother is a psychologist, and you have twin sisters and they're also psychologists?

Biswas-Diener:(laughs) That's absolutely right. I'm number five in the family, so you can imagine what we talk about when we get together (laughs). Other people don't like to eat over at our house.

Dr. Dave: (Laughs) Particularly if you gang up on them.

Now, a major thrust of your career has been the study of psychological strengths. Maybe you'd like to tell us a bit about that.

Biswas-Diener: Yeah, absolutely. I'm particularly interested in strengths. I call them the back door to happiness. For a long time people who've had an interest in happiness have sort of asked that golden

question ‘what can I do to be happier’ and all sorts of pretty small and basic sort of interventions have come about. You can write down 3 things you’re happy for. You can savor a meal. Kind of basic things that will make you a bit happier.

But, what I was concerned about was everyone was taking a sort of ‘frontal’ approach to happiness; ‘I want to be happier, I see happiness out there as a target, now I want to kind of just ‘go and get it.’” But what I realized is we already experience happiness, naturally. It’s the natural by-product of so many things that we do during the day. You know, you get a good parking spot and you’re like “Yes!” and you feel a little bit of happiness.

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Right.

Biswas-Diener: Someone gives you a compliment and you feel a bit rosy. You know, you’re getting these little bursts of happiness throughout the day. So it made me realize you’re not *trying*. You’re not saying ‘I wish to get a good parking spot so that I will be happy,’ you just want to get a good parking spot and it ends up making you happy. So I wondered what else will end up making you happy. It turns out that your personal strengths, these sort of inborn potentials, these capacities, these leanings you have that you’re pretty good at, or you could be pretty good at because you have this leaning. They’re energizing, by and large.

So, maybe you’re musically gifted, you’re not just born knowing how to play the piano, you must learn, you must put in effort, and I think the same is true of all strengths. You’re not just born courageous and you never have to work at it, I think you have to cultivate courage, you have to fail at it sometimes, you have to kind of experience it in all of its glory, and you get better and better and better at it.

Well it turns out that when you employ your strengths, you end up feeling more energized. Sometimes you are more successful, you’re more likely to persevere and feel engaged in your work or your goals, so

you end up feeling a bit happier. So in this way, strengths are the back door to happiness.

Dr. Dave: Well Positive Psychology has put a lot of emphasis on strengths, at least initially, but then, from something you wrote, I heard a whisper, something that seemed to suggest ‘well, we shouldn’t turn our attention totally away from weaknesses’ so what’s that balance, there, in terms of the consensus that’s emerging in the field or your own personal take?

Biswas-Diener: Sure, absolutely. I talk a lot to people about the relationship of strengths to weaknesses. And I usually say that it’s a bit like a sailboat, just to give you a pretty simple metaphor that’s easy to understand. The weaknesses are like having a crack in the sailboat or a slight leak in the sailboat, and if you don’t deal with them, you know, your boats gonna sink (laughs). So you ought to deal with the leak in proportion to how big the leak is. So, if it’s just nothing and it’s a tiny bit of water sloshing around, you may be able to ignore it, but if it’s seeping in quite quickly, you know, you’ve gotta bail it out and you do have to attend to it. You cannot ignore it. And if it’s a giant gash in the side of your boat, you need to do something quite remedial, take your boat out of the water, put it in a dock, really work hard on it. But the thing is, even if you do address these leaks and fix them and get your boat back in the water, all you’ve done is keep it from sinking. It doesn’t help propel your boat forward at all. That’s what I think you need your strengths for. Your strengths are more like the sails on the boat. So, managing the weaknesses keep you from sinking, keep you from going under, but appropriately hoisting the sails, you know, the right wind conditions, putting up just the right amount of sheet. That’s actually what propels you forward towards the successes in your life.

Dr. Dave: I like that metaphor. Now I know that you’re also very involved in the happiness coaching movement. What would you say to

critics who might view coaching as an in run around the requirements of becoming licensed as a psychotherapist?

Biswas-Diener: (laughs) That's a great question, wow, good one (laughs). I think that, professionally speaking, coaching and psychotherapy are two distinct animals. Psychotherapy is largely around addressing psychological distress. Clinical levels of anxiety, depression and other problems that truly interfere with your basic functioning; your work, your relationships. I think responsible coaches, and I'm not gonna put all coaches in this category, but certainly responsible, trained, professional coaches, they deal with people who are whole and resourceful, people who are dynamic, people who are not, and I don't mean this to sound insulting, but that are not in any way 'broken.' These are people who are high-performing individuals. And when we coach people, we're coaching high performers to reach the next level, to stretch themselves, to perform even better. Much like an Olympic athlete is still coached.

Dr. Dave: That's what I was just thinking, yeah.

Biswas-Diener: So are there times they might work with, for example, a manager or an executive that they might bring up a little bit of self doubt, or a little bit of anxiety? Certainly. I'm not going to pretend that that doesn't happen. But the types of doubts and anxieties they bring up are not clinical in nature. They're not interfering with their basic ability to function. They're not pervasive, they're not a quality that describes this person day in, day out. They're just temporary concerns of the type that any high functioning, non-psychotherapy client would have.

Now, with your question in mind, I would like to say that I do think that responsible coaches also are aware of the line where psychotherapy occurs and are under obligation to refer those types of clients out to licensed and trained psychotherapists.

Dr. Dave: I was trained as a psychotherapist, and I imagine that a number of people with that kind of training might go through a thought process that goes something like this: “hmm, let’s see, on the one hand, I can work with people that are really unhappy and dysfunctional. On the other hand, I could become a coach and work with people who are already happy. Hmm, which way should I go?” (laughs)

Biswas-Diener: Yeah, interestingly, I see more and more therapists opening what we’d call ‘hybrid practices.’ Because so many of the basic skills of therapy and coaching are transferable to one another. Therapists, they have their normal clients, they’re doing noble work, but having a couple coaching clients might make their day a bit softer, a bit easier. To my knowledge there hasn’t been a single study done yet on the effects of having a hybrid practice on things like burnout. But you could predict that working with a couple of very high functioning clients might help the psychotherapist to be a bit more robust and burn out less. I would love to see a study on that.

Dr. Dave: That’s an interesting idea.

Now we were talking earlier about strengths. You’re doing a morning workshop at the upcoming [International Positive Psychology Association](#) second world conference in Philadelphia. Tell us a bit about that association and about that conference.

Biswas-Diener: Sure, I’d be happy to. So, it has a lengthy name, as you just said (laughs). IPPA, as people usually call it, is sort of the world governing body of the profession of Positive Psychology. It’s not only for professional researchers, it’s for anyone with an interest in Positive Psychology, and this includes coaches and consultants, lay people who are just searching for their own happiness, school teachers that want to implement it. Anyone that’s interested in the ideas of optimism, happiness, strengths, resilience or other aspects of Positive Psychology.

So IPPA has a world congress that meets every other year in Philadelphia, and people, really, it’s thousands of people that literally

come from dozens of nations from around the world. It's largely talks, an academic conference, so you can hear from some of the giants. You can hear from Martin Seligman, the founder of the Positive Psychology movement. You can hear from my father, who will be there giving a talk. There are also workshops like the Strengths Workshop. Even Roko is showing his movie Happy there.

Dr. Dave: Oh wow, that's great.

As we wind down, is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Biswas-Diener: No, I don't think so. I've really enjoyed my time here, and I've loved your questions.

Dr. Dave: Well I've certainly enjoyed the conversation with you.

Dr Robert Biswas-Diener, thanks for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio

Biswas-Diener: Thanks so much for having me.