

THE BIG IDEAS

The Relationship Gym

Hit it. Today!

Aristotelian Lovers

= The REAL Soul Mates.

SNAP

James geniuses x2.

Know Thy...

Self and thy partner.

Love Is an Action Verb

Take the vow.

Happy Together

Using the Science of Positive Psychology to Build Love That Lasts

BY SUZANN PILEGGI PAWELSKI, MAPP AND JAMES O. PAWELSKI PH.D. · TARCHERPERIGEE © 2018
· 272 PAGES

"We are now excited to be able to present this work in book format. And we offer it to all those who are—or hope to be—in romantic relationships and want to make them the happiest, healthiest, and most fulfilling they can be. We want to be clear we are not claiming that we have it all figured out, that our relationship is one blissful moment after another, and that if you follow our instructions, you too will live happily ever after. (Trust us, it's not sunshine and rainbows all the time for us, either!) Instead of fairy-tale endings, we believe in brave beginnings and informed efforts, not so we can magically find the relationship of our dreams, but so we can wisely create beautiful relationships in the real world.

Note that this book is not titled *13 Steps to a Blissful Marriage*, *The Complete Guide to Happily Ever After*, or *Everything You Need to Know About Romantic Relationships*. Although such titles seem appealing in the easy promises they offer, we believe they are fundamentally misleading. Marriages are not meat loafs, in which mastering a few steps will yield perfect results every time. Nor are they so simple that anyone can provide a complete guide to them, since each and every marriage or partnership is affected by myriad complications, starting with the two people in it. The truth is, real relationships can be delightful, uplifting, and satisfying, yet are often messy and frustrating—and sometimes heartbreaking. The important thing to keep in mind is that, as with any human endeavor, we can get better at relationships through well-directed effort. ...

Whether you are newlywed or newly single or you have been married for fifty years or have not yet been in a romantic relationship, we invite you to think of this book as an invitation to the relationship gym, where we can all benefit from the advice of psychologists and philosophers to help us actively build love that lasts."

~ Suzann Pileggi Pawelski and James Pawelski from *Happy Together*

Suzie Pileggi Pawelski, MAPP, is a freelance writer and well-being consultant specializing in the science of happiness and its effects on relationships and health. She has a Master of Applied Positive Psychology degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

James Pawelski, PhD, is a Professor of Practice (<- best professorial title EVER?) and the Director of Education in the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, where he cofounded the Masters of Applied Positive Psychology program with Martin Seligman. He is one of the world's leading positive psychologists who has presented keynote talks in more than twenty countries on six continents.

I got this book after James Pawelski and Larry King interviewed me as part of their [Positive Voices interview series](#). (One of our Heroic Coach - Class I graduates, Donna Hemmert, introduced us. Thanks again for connecting us, Donna!!)

"As Aristotelian Lovers, we are attracted to our partners because of the good we see in them, and this motivates us to want to become better people and to support our partners in their quest to become better people themselves."

~ Suzann Pileggi Pawelski and James Pawelski

"Instead of focusing on what we can get out of the relationship, we concentrate our attention on how we can help our partners grow and flourish, with a love of the goodness in the other person's character serving as the foundation for our desire to do so. And that kind of love-one based on virtue-is more likely to last a lifetime."

~ Suzann Pileggi Pawelski and James Pawelski

"Aristotle noted that many of the emotions, desires, and actions we experience are similar to fear and pleasure. We can respond to them on a continuum, from deficiency to excess, with the proper response being somewhere in the middle. In Aristotle's terms, the proper response is virtue, which is the mean between the two vices. And good character is choosing virtues across the spectrum of emotions, desires, and actions."

~ Suzann Pileggi Pawelski and James Pawelski

When I heard about this book, I immediately got it. When it arrived, Alexandra (who reads as much as I do!) immediately grabbed it and read it first. She loved it. So did I.

I like to start a book by reading the back cover then the inside flap then the testimonials. This book features testimonials from a Who's Who of positive psychology Luminaries. I went through the list and marked off the books we've covered and noted the ones we haven't covered (yet!) so we can expand our collection!

For example, here's a brief list of brilliant authors we've featured who loved the book as much as I did: Angela Duckworth ([Grit](#)), Tom Rath ([Life's Great Question](#), [Eat Move Sleep](#), [Are You Fully Charged?](#)), Tal Ben-Shahar ([Happier](#), [The Pursuit of Perfect](#) and [Choose the Life You Want](#)), Marci Shimoff ([Happy for No Reason](#)), Joshua Rosenthal ([Integrative Nutrition](#)), Barry Schwartz ([The Paradox of Choice](#)), Ed Diener ([Happiness](#)), Barbara Fredrickson ([Love 2.0](#)), Scott Barry Kaufman ([Wired to Create](#)), George Vaillant ([Spiritual Evolution](#)), Ryan Niemiec ([The Power of Character Strengths](#)), Caroline Adams Miller ([Getting Grit](#)) and Sonja Lyubomirsky ([The How of Happiness](#) and [The Myths of Happiness](#)).

Then we have the cofounder of the whole Positive Psychology movement himself, Martin Seligman, with whom James cofounded the Masters of Applied Positive Psychology program at Penn. He wrote the incredible foreword. (Check out our Notes on [Learned Optimism](#), [Authentic Happiness](#) and [Flourish](#).)

So, yah. The book comes *incredibly* highly recommended. For one *very* simple reason. It's FANTASTIC. I've been waiting for a very long time for the book that would make me say: "READ THIS BOOK if you want to figure out how to integrate Ancient Wisdom + Modern Science + Practical Tools to Optimize your relationship." And, well, THIS book is it.

I HIGHLY recommend it. Get a copy [here](#). Of course, it's PACKED with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

Oh! Almost forgot. We're deeply honored that James and Suzie joined our Guest Faculty as Luminaries sharing their wisdom in our Heroic Coach program. (Cruise on over [here](#) to learn more about that and over [here](#) to see the other extraordinary teachers who support our Coaches in being the change so we can change the world together.)

THE RELATIONSHIP GYM

"We believe in the importance of working on our relationships just like we work on our bodies at the gym. Fitness doesn't come magically; it's the result of sustained effort. And this effort needs to be directed wisely. This is why we turn to trainers for advice. And any good trainer will tell you how important it is to develop good exercise habits that can make it easier to get to the gym and keep going on our routines. This is true of relationships, as well. Sustained efforts and habits are essential. And once we begin to see the fruits of our labor, and enjoy greater understanding and better interactions with our partners, we naturally become motivated to work even harder. Eventually, the hard work doesn't seem to be so 'hard' or 'work' at all, but rather becomes natural and fun behavior we want to keep doing. To help us direct our efforts wisely in our 'relationship gym,' we will need to look to leading researchers in the field of positive psychology for their evidence-based advice. Since positive psychology is steeped in a rich philosophical tradition, we will also look to great thinkers such as Aristotle, who extolled the value of 'the good life' and expounded on what good relationships look like, and William James, who emphasized the importance of cultivating healthy habits through continual effort and directed attention."

Ah, the Relationship Gym. Suzie and James know how to speak my (and our!) language.

Of course, it's easy to "fall" in love. It's much harder [to "stand" and/or "grow" in love](#). If we want to master the complex art and science of relationships, there's only ONE way to do it: diligent, patient, persistent practice. We need to show up at the Relationship Gym.

"Being emotionally attuned to your partner is the essence of trust, and [John] Gottman offers the acronym ATTUNE to outline the key elements of this type of connection: Attention, Turning Toward, Tolerance, Understanding, Non-defensive responding, and Empathy. This is a helpful way to remind us to turn toward our partner with our full attention, to be tolerant and understanding, and to communicate in a non-defensive, empathic way."

~ Suzann Pileggi Pawelski and James Pawelski

As I read that passage and reflected on James' and Suzie's love of Aristotle, I couldn't help but think about the fact that his ancient Lyceum was known as a sort of Harvard meets Equinox. (Or, in this case, another Ivy League school: Penn!)

The ancient philosophers? They weren't mere "librarians" cataloging ideas. [They were more like warriors PRACTICING these ideas](#)—vigorously disciplining themselves in the gym of life to become the very best they were capable of being. Which makes me think of a few other things.

First, remember that when we go to the gym, [we don't lift Styrofoam weights](#). Not if we want to get strong. Guess what? Same with our Relationship Gym. Those challenges? They're weights. Use them to get stronger.

I also thought of Leo Buscaglia. In [Love](#), he makes the great point that: *"If he desired to know about automobiles, he would, without question, study diligently about automobiles. If his wife desired to be a gourmet cook, she'd certainly study the art of cooking, perhaps even attending a cooking class. Yet, it never seems as obvious to him that if he wants to live in love, he must spend at least as much time as the auto mechanic or the gourmet in studying love."*

(Again, before THIS book there really WASN'T a single book I could point to that integrates Ancient Wisdom + Modern Science + Practical Tools which is why (echo!) this book is so epic.)

Finally, I think of a couple old-school Stoics. Seneca and Musonius Rufus.

In terms of the "hard work" becoming something we look forward to, Seneca said exactly (!) this back in the day. In [Letters from a Stoic](#), he tells us: *"How much better to pursue a straight course and eventually reach that destination where the things that are pleasant and the things that are honorable finally become, for you, the same."*

How do we do that? Seneca also tells us: *"You have to persevere and fortify your pertinacity until the will to good becomes a disposition to good."* In other words. HIT THE GYM!

All of which leads us to Musonius Rufus who, in his [Lectures](#), gives some of the best relationship advice I've ever read: *"In marriage, there must be, above all, companionship and care of husband and wife for each other, both in sickness and in health and on every occasion. ... When this mutual care is complete and those who live together provide it to each other completely, each competes to surpass the other in giving such care. Such a marriage is admirable and deserves emulation; such a partnership is beautiful."*

One more time: Want to Optimize your relationships? Move from Theory to PRACTICE. Hit the Relationship Gym. (TODAY!)

ARISTOTELIAN LOVERS = GOOD SOUL MATES

*"The word Aristotle uses for happiness is *eudaimonia*, a compound word constructed from the Greek *eu* (good) and *daimon* (god, spirit, demon). It carries with it connotations of good fortune and divinity, of what might be called blessedness. Aristotle observed that there was a near-universal agreement in his day that the good life is a life of *eudaimonia*. But problems arose when people gave their opinions on what the eudaimonic life consists of. Similar disagreements on what happiness is continue today, as well. ...*

*Although the term *eudaimonia* is usually translated as happiness, it means more than just a pleasant mood and refers to overall well-being or flourishing. We will continue to use the word *happiness* in this book, but please keep in mind that we are using it ... with Aristotle's rich and comprehensive notion of *eudaimonia* in mind."*

That's from a chapter called "What Aristotle Can Teach Us About Building Love That Lasts." A choir of angels may have been singing the ENTIRE time I read this chapter. *Ode to Joy* was on repeat. Seriously. For about a million reasons.

"While Beth and Sam are a fun couple, and their relationship is rich with pleasurable moments, fun isn't the foundation of their relationship. Rather, the bedrock of their marriage is a mutual respect for one another and a shared goal of becoming better individuals and working together to help increase the goodness in the world. This is a classic case of Aristotelian friendship, with Beth and Sam being exemplary Aristotelian lovers. Their relationship is rich in shared positive emotions and values, which is a big part of what has kept their partnership going strong for more than twenty-five years!"

~ Suzann Pileggi Pawelski and James Pawelski

"To change one's life, start immediately, do it flamboyantly, no exceptions."

~ William James

First, of course, OUR entire work is to help us operationalize virtue to become the Optimize = Optimus = Best = Eudaimon = Heroic versions of our selves more and more consistently.

Suzie and James lean on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* ([see those Notes!](#)) to extend that highest good to what is, arguably, THE most important aspect of our lives: our relationships. They describe individuals in an ideal, virtues-based, loving relationship: "Aristotelian Lovers." (<- Can't you hear the angels singing in my head when I read that?! lol)

As I typed all that out, I realized that the book could have been called "Flourishing Together" as, of course, the REAL sense of "happiness" we're talking about is the deepest eudaimonic sense of more and more consistently expressing the best version of ourselves and engaging in our relationships with the express intent to help our partners actualize THEIR potential.

Alexandra and I actually kick off our (old-school classic!) Love 101 class with the same basic idea. At the time, I didn't have Aristotle's wisdom well integrated into my philosophy so we leaned more on [Leo Buscaglia's](#) wisdom. He tells us: "As soon as the love relationship does not lead me to me, as soon as I in a love relationship do not lead another person to himself, this love, even if it seems to be the most secure and ecstatic attachment I have ever experienced, is not true love. For real love is dedicated to continual becoming."

To bring the point home, Suzie and James juxtapose the "You complete me!" type of love from *Jerry Maguire* with the "You make me want to be a better man" type of love from *As Good As It Gets*. Can you guess which one will lead to a deeper sense of flourishing? They also go off (!) on the history of the whole romantic ideal of a "soul mate." Check out the book for the full answer to that riddle and pop-culture history lesson. For now, know that the TRUE "Soul Mate" Identity we want to embrace is of the eudaimonic, good soul to good soul, Aristotelian Lover variety!

SNAP: JAMES GENIUSES X2

"Of course, developing good habits in our relationship is far easier said than done. William James presents four maxims to help us in this endeavor. And James Pawelski has created an acronym to make them easy to remember: SNAP.

1. **Start strong.** The more highly motivated we are to start a new habit, the more likely we are to be successful. One way to increase our motivation is to make a public announcement of what we are going to do. That makes it easy for our friends to support us in achieving our goal and hard for us to go back on our intentions.
2. **No exceptions.** We may think that once we have acted in accordance with the new behavior for a few days, we can give ourselves a break. But James argues that this is likely to make us have to start the process all over again.
3. **Always act.** Whenever we have an urge to act in accordance with the new habit, we should follow that urge, no matter how annoying it may seem.
4. **Practice exercising the will.** James suggests doing something hard every day, for no reason but that it is hard. Doing so, he says, can strengthen the will, making it ready for our use when we need it."

So, Part 1 of the book is all about "The Philosophy and Psychology Behind Long-Lasting Love." It starts with that chapter on Aristotle then it covers the first three key aspects we want to cultivate to Flourish Together: Passion, Positive Emotions, and Savoring.

I might have read the chapter on Aristotle and then skipped ahead to Part 2 on "Why Cultivating Character Matters for Committed Relationships" in which we get to spend MORE time with our beloved Aristotle talking about virtue before inviting William James to the party along with the modern positive psychologists who are empirically establishing the fundamental importance of putting our virtues in action.

"There are five strengths that have been found to be most closely connected to flourishing. Can you guess which they are? If these strengths aren't already among your top five, we recommend spending some effort cultivating them, since they seem to be especially important for well-being. The five strengths are love, gratitude, zest, hope, and curiosity."

~ Suzann Pileggi Pawelski and James Pawelski

That wisdom above is from the first chapter in this section called "Know Thyself: Identifying Your Strengths." (Note1: After identifying OUR strengths, we need to move on to identifying our PARTNER'S strengths. Note2: This reminded me of our +1's on Knowing Our #1 Self-Care Habit AND knowing our PARTNER'S #1 Self-Care Habit. More on that in our next Idea.)

[William James](#) is one of James Pawelski's heroes. I love the SNAP acronym. And, of course, I absolutely love embracing the fact that, as Aristotle says, to be virtuous we must remember: "Moral virtues, like crafts, are acquired by practice and habituation."

And, Aristotle tells us: "There is a further qualification [for attaining eudaimonic happiness]: in a complete lifetime. One swallow does not make a summer; neither does one day. Similarly, neither can one day, or a brief space of time, make a man blessed and happy."

(Again: If you haven't read our Notes on Aristotle's [Nicomachean Ethics](#), get on that! It's some of the most important wisdom we'll ever study and practice—which is why I use Aristotle as our proxy for Ancient Wisdom in [Module I of our Mastery Series on what we call Eudaimonology](#). And, of course, I use Martin Seligman and his wisdom from [Flourish](#) as our proxy for Modern Science which is why those angels wouldn't stop singing as I read this book! Laughing.)

We talk about this a ton throughout our work together and I bring it all home in our Mastery Series Module on Algorithms in which I encourage us to use our willpower wisely to install habits that run on autopilot via algorithms. You can also check out Willpower 101, Habits 101 and Algorithms 101 for more. (Put all those together and we have SELF-MASTERY 101.)

And, of course, check out our Notes on BJ Fogg's [Tiny Habits](#), James Clear's [Atomic Habits](#), Charles Duhigg's [The Power of Habit](#) and Roy Baumeister's [Willpower](#) and Kelly McGonigal's [The Willpower Instinct](#) for more on this incredibly important subject.

P.S. After soaking up this chapter, I went back to the Passion + Positive Emotions + Savoring chapters. They are, of course, fantastic. Check out the book for more. For now, know that we want to cultivate HARMONIOUS Passion (vs. Obsessive Passion), cultivate Positive Emotions (including joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love) ([while grounding them in buoyant reality](#)) while we Savor life's awesomeness so we can "lengthen and strengthen" the positive effects of positive emotions in our lives.

KNOW THYSELF + KNOW THY PARTNER

"In this chapter, we will explore our signature strengths in greater detail. Initially, we will focus on understanding and developing the strengths of each person in the relationship, then we will focus on integrating both partners' strengths so that the whole becomes more than the sum of its parts. This is particularly important because research suggests that when you recognize and appreciate your partner's character strengths you are more likely to be happy in your relationship, have your psychological needs met, and be more sexually satisfied. (That got your attention, didn't it?) You'll want to make sure you know your own signature strengths, as identified by the VIA Survey. And if you're reading this book with your partner, you will want to know each other's, as well. So if you haven't yet taken the survey, we invite you to pause right now and do so. The link to the survey is posted on our website, at [buildhappytogether.com](#)."

Have YOU taken the VIA Survey yet? How about your partner? Cruise on over to Suzie and James' web site and get on that: [buildhappytogether.com](#). (Note to self: While there, check out the video by Tiffany Shelton called "The Science of Character"!)

In addition to being the ONLY book integrating positive psychology and relationships, this is ALSO one of (if not THE) best books on the philosophy and science of virtue as well. James was LITERALLY there on Day 1 when they came up with their organizational system and James and Suzie weave the practical science together brilliantly. (Note: The other top choice for an overview on the science of virtue would be Ryan Niemiec's [The Power of Character Strengths](#).)

"Becoming a bit nerdy about strengths can be quite valuable. Including your strengths in the vocabulary of your relationship and discussing them frequently can help you keep a balanced focus on the good things in your life together."

~ Suzann Pileggi Pawelski and James Pawelski

"We invite you to join us in making a formal and public commitment to becoming Aristotelian lovers. We encourage you to tell your friends and family about your commitment to love the good in your partner to support your partner in the continued development in that good, and to work to become a better person yourself."

~ Suzann Pileggi Pawelski and James Pawelski

Suzie and James make important distinctions about the challenge of finding the virtuous-mean expression of our strengths—neither “underusing” them (which would be a vice of deficiency) or “overusing” them (which would be a vice of excess). They tell us that mastering this process takes a LIFETIME of practice. Then they help us integrate our strengths with our partner’s strengths via some GREAT practical exercises—from Strengths Conversations to Strengths Dates.

Again, check out the book for a LOT more. For now, curious souls may like to know that my Top Strengths are: Creativity + Hope + Zest + Purpose + Kindness while Alexandra’s are Creativity + Curiosity + Love of Learning + Playfulness + Perspective. We often have fun celebrating each other’s strengths and we’ll be having fun with the recommended practices! :)

LOVE IS AN ACTION VERB

“We invite you to join us in making a formal and public commitment to becoming Aristotelian lovers. We encourage you to tell your friends and family about your commitment to love the good in your partner and to support your partner in the continued development in that good, and to work to become a better person yourself.”

That’s from the Conclusion “Love Is an Action Verb” in which we get a brilliant recap of the book and then get to soak our souls in a beautiful (!) poem James wrote for Suzie for their wedding.

Shall we make a formal and public commitment to being Aristotelian lovers—telling our friends and family about our commitment to love the good in our partners and to support them in the continued development of that good as we work to become a better person ourselves?

I’m in. You? In fact, I’ll have this wisdom in mind as I recommit to showing up as my Optimus-best Love wise when I do my Carpe Diem journaling every morning. “Soul Mate” was always Aristotelian in origin but now I know just how perfectly it captures my commitment to be an Aristotelian lover—not just for Alexandra but also for our kids, our Team, and YOU.

With Love + Wisdom + Self-Mastery + Courage + Hope + Gratitude + Curiosity + ZEST!

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He’s spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.

If you liked this Note, you’ll probably like...

[The Nicomachean Ethics](#)

[Flourish](#)

[The 7 Principles for Making Marriage Work](#)

[Pursuing the Good Life](#)

[Character Strengths Matter](#)

[Love](#)

[Love 2.0](#)

[Happier](#)