

Live long and prosper



BY KIM URQUHART

Sociologist Corey Keyes has dedicated his career to studying what makes life worth living and is a pioneer of positive psychology. Yet Keyes, who has been called “Dr. Positive” by his students, has a very serious vision for the future of public health.

“I want to change the way we do health care and population health in this country,” says Keyes, an associate professor of sociology with a joint appointment in public health and an adjunct professor of psychology. “We are living longer — on average 30 years longer than at the start of the twentieth century — yet we are not living healthier. The question is: Are we just living dependent and sick, or are we living healthy and able to contribute?”

Keyes argues that the quality of life should be as important as the quantity. The public health focus needs to shift from illness and disease to health and well-being. He calls for a complementary approach to health care, one that integrates behavioral and social sciences into medicine and public health.

A key component of this, and the one that Keyes is most interested in, is mental health. “Good mental health requires more than the mere absence of mental illness,” he explains.

An internationally known expert on mental health, Keyes helped conceptualize the principles for a new field known as positive psychology, the scientific study of optimal human functioning. Keyes is one of a select group of scholars striving to shift the emphasis of psychology from fixing what is wrong with people to developing what is right.

Keyes measures social and psychological functioning through the “mental health continuum,” which evaluates a person’s positive feelings toward life. Most Americans associate the term mental health with mental illness, Keyes explains, so he coined the word “flourishing” to describe mentally healthy adults who have high levels of emotional well-being in their lives.

Keyes characterizes the absence of mental health as “languishing,” and says adults who are languishing have little emotional, psychological or social well-being, yet are not clinically depressed.

The results of Keyes’ studies show the importance of promoting positive psychology, he says. For instance, languishing adults have the same number of chronic diseases as those who are depressed. Flourishing adults tend to miss fewer days of work, experience fewer health problems and tend to have a sense of purpose in their life.

Keyes teaches the concept of flourishing as part of his sociology and Evening at Emory courses and is in great demand as a lecturer throughout the world. During a sabbatical last year, Keyes spoke at a conference in South Africa, a workshop in the Netherlands and a seminar in Italy.

This summer, he will be a keynote speaker at an Australian conference on “Happiness & Its Causes” with the Dalai Lama.

“The Buddhists are really interested in this work of flourishing and languishing, because it maps very nicely onto the concept of moving from suffering to enlightenment,” says Keyes, who admits he is intrigued to see the connection of his work to ancient spiritual tradition.

Indeed, his work revolves around a question that philosophers have been asking for centuries: What is happiness? He explains that most Americans equate happiness with feeling good.

“I think we set up an impossible task, because our hedonistic version of happiness is impossible to sustain,” he says. “But it is quite possible to feel fulfilled and content and that the world is meaningful by aligning yourself with some ideals, something that is bigger and better than you, and trying to live up to it.”

Keyes seems to have followed his own advice, and can claim a place in the flourishing category. But it wasn’t always this way.

He grows reflective as he talks of a troubled childhood that was marked by abuse. The pain of his early life subsided when his grandparents adopted Keyes and his sister.

“It was like night and day, to suddenly have a normal life,” Keyes recalls.

While he was ultimately able to flourish, finding strength and resilience in the Catholic Church and becoming the first in his family to go to college, his sister still struggles with chronic depression. He often wonders why they ended up on such different paths.

If health care providers moved from simply treating mental illness to promoting and nurturing mental health, Keyes wonders how many more good kids would make it out of bad situations.

Although Keyes was drawn to sociology because it gave him a perspective on life, his original intention was to become a priest. He recalls the difficult summer of his freshman year at the University of Wisconsin when he struggled with whether to continue with his studies or enroll in seminary in Chicago.

He decided to finish college, and it was there that he discovered what would become two life-long passions: he met his wife of 21 years, and took his first psychology course, which sparked his interest in the social sciences. “Sociology was where it all could come together for me,” explains Keyes, who went on to earn a master’s and then a Ph.D. in the field.

In 1997, he was offered a teaching post at Emory. Although his wife had a successful law practice in Madison, Wis., she encouraged him to take the position, a dual appointment in sociology and public health. It is this interdisciplinary focus that Keyes particularly enjoys about his work at Emory.

“You are not going to understand something as complex as health through one discipline,” he says. “To me, the most exciting stuff is when you can get people from different backgrounds working together to solve the same challenge.”

Keyes first became a proponent of cross-disciplinary research during his work with the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Midlife Development, where he was part of a select group of scholars from a variety of disciplines charged with studying midlife, a seldom-studied and ill-defined stage of life.

“Being part of the MacArthur Foundation was the most formative experience in my intellectual life,” he says. “It was one of the best interdisciplinary experiences I’ve ever had.”

Keyes is equally “jazzed” about an interdisciplinary initiative under way at Emory — predictive health. Part of the University’s strategic plan, predictive health calls for a new model of health care focused on health maintenance rather than treatment of disease.

Keyes was a featured speaker at the recent Emory/Georgia Tech Predictive Health Symposium, adding what he sees as an important social and behavioral perspective into the mix.

Emory is “unparalleled in pursuing predictive health,” he says. “When anyone else says they are doing predictive health, they are talking about the reduction of illness. When we say predictive health we’re talking about mapping, measuring and maintaining your health as something positive, as long as possible.”

The current health care system is outdated, Keyes believes. He calls for a worldwide shift from “thinking we can cure our way out of disease and ill health” to a new paradigm that focuses on ways to promote health.

“We have got to stop thinking that the old system can just be tinkered with, like an old car. ‘I’ll just put in a new carburetor in the Cadillac and it will run better.’ No, we need a whole new car,” he says. Predictive health is a chance to revolutionize the process, he says.

“Scientifically, we have been taking Humpty Dumpty apart for the last 100 years,” he says. “It is about time to start putting those pieces back together so that we can prevent more people from breaking in the first place.”