Using Positive Psychology to Improve Your Everyday Life

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Goals for Today

• Introduce the concept of Positive Psychology
• Demonstrate scientifically valid ways positive psychology techniques can help you to improve your everyday life
• Discuss what specifically you can do to focus more on happiness and joy rather than the stresses of everyday life
What We Will **Not** Do

• We will not talk strictly theory
• This is not a clinical psychology lecture
• Nor a general psychology lecture
• We will not discuss how difficult life is...

• I am not here to waste your time talking about what you already know
A Little About Me: Education

• Doctorate in social psychology
• Master of arts degree in clinical psychology
• Followed positive psychology for the last several years
• Over two dozen published scientific articles (peer-reviewed), book chapters and other works
Qualifications: Experience

• Currently employed as a full time research psychologist
  – Research topics include
    • Child abuse
    • Domestic Violence
    • Hate crimes (thesis & dissertation)
    • Substance use disorders
• Cal State University Dominguez Hills
• Taught psychology for over 15 years
More Personal

• My history
  – Childhood abuse, neglect and abandonment

• Went into psychology to help people or to help myself

• No answers in clinical psychology, so I switched my major
Be Kind, For Everyone You Know is Fighting A Hard Battle

Rev. John Watson aka Ian Maclaren
WHAT ABOUT YOU?
WHAT ABOUT YOUR BATTLES?
ARE YOU KIND TO YOURSELF?
Self Care

- Long walks
- Baths
- A good meal
- Enough rest and relaxation
- Time for prayer or meditation
- Exercise
- Good diet
- Work you enjoy....
Positive what?

What exactly is Positive Psychology?
How is it different from other branches of psychology?
Clinical and other Branches of Psychology

• Psychology focus on mental illness
• Describing and measuring depression, schizophrenia, cognitive capabilities, etc.
• Explanations for ‘disorders’ across the lifespan
• Genetics, biochemistry, psychological causes
• Emphasis on relieving the ‘pain’
Time has arrived for a science that seeks to understand positive emotion and strengths and offer us guideposts for the ‘good life’

New research into happiness shows that it can be lastingly increased
Positive Psychology

• Branch of psychology that uses scientific understanding and effective intervention to aid in the achievement of a satisfactory life, rather than treating mental illness...

• Focus on personal growth rather than pathology...
  – Wikipedia 2015
Origins of Positive Psychology

• 1954 - Origins with Maslow
• 1998 - Martin Seligman, APA president
• 1999 - First summit
• 2002 - First international conference
• 2006 - Harvard lecture
• 2009 - World Congress University of Penn
Shares ideas with Humanistic Psychology

- Abraham Maslow
- Positive instincts to fulfill human potential.
- Strong motivating force to do good.
- Be the best that they could be.
- Self-actualization.
- Client-centered therapy of Carl Rogers
Two Pioneers

Martin Seligman
• APA President 1998
• Psychology split into two camps:
  – Academics more interested in science
  – Clinicians interested in practice of psychotherapy
• Hoped to bring science and practice together

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
• Notes for work in happiness and creativity
• Architect of concept of Flow
  – Concentration or absorption with activity at hand
• Author of over 120 articles or books
Seligman: Learned Helplessness

- Inescapable shock
- Got shock
- No coping mechanism
- No way to terminate shock
- “Passive”

- Escapable shock
- Had coping mechanism
- Press nose button to terminate shock
- “Active”
Parallels with Reactive Depression

• Triggered by traumatic life event (ex. death of loved one)
• Passivity
• Difficulty in learning responses that bring relief
• Physical symptoms
• Stress related disorders
An epiphany

• Seligman and daughter in the garden
• Seligman resolved to change
• His purpose in life was not to correct his daughter’s shortcomings
• Instead, raising her to nurture the strength she displayed (social intelligence)
• Can psychological science be about identifying and nurturing strengths?
PRINCIPLE

• Psychotherapy makes miserable people less miserable, but not happy

• Positive psychology makes people happier
3 Pillars of Positive Psychology

• STUDY OF POSITIVE EMOTION
• STUDY OF POSITIVE TRAITS - strengths, virtues, abilities (intelligence, athleticism)
• STUDY OF POSITIVE INSTITUTIONS
Positive Psychology

• Prevention of mental illness by recognizing and nurturing a set of strengths, competencies and virtues in people
• Building strengths as a buffer
• Disease model focuses on deficits
More on Positive Psychology

• Most people adapt and adjust to life in creative ways
• Resilience: Bounce back after loss
• Go beyond recovery
• Life takes on new meaning and focus
• Study strengths and resilience using scientific method
• What makes life worth living?
Human strengths

• Despite all the difficulties of life, majority of people manage to live with dignity and purpose
• Positive psychology adopts a more optimistic perspective on human potential, motives, and capacities
• Humanistic psychology with scientific methods
Optimistic Triad

- **Permanent**: bad doesn’t last, good does.
- **Pervasive**: good affects everything; bad is localized and doesn’t affect other parts of life.
- **Personal**: Good = my fault; bad = random
- We can teach ourselves and our children to think optimistically.

We can increase our happiness - *Interventions*

Recent Seligman Research:

• Several Positive Psychology interventions are equal to or better than:
  – Treatment as usual (CBT)
  – Medication
  – Combined medication and treatment as usual


What are these Interventions?

Six (6) Specific Interventions
Positive Psychology Interventions

• Does not require you to spend any money
• Does not require you to read a set of texts, or a single book – but if you want...
• Does not require you to change your routine, but it if done as instructed, will change your outlook on life
Six Interventions

1. Three Things I am Thankful For (Or Three Blessings)
2. Gratitude Exercise
3. Signature Strengths
4. Good Deed
5. Practice Mindfulness
6. Be Kind/Compassionate

And a couple of extras...
Three Things I am Thankful For
(Or Three Blessings)
Three Things I am Thankful For
(Or Three Blessings)

• Perhaps the simplest
• Each night before you go to sleep
  – Think of three good things that happened that day
  – Write them down
  – Reflect on why they happened
• Do this for at least 3 weeks
• Can be simple or complex, up to you
Can and should be brief

What went well

1. My Chihuahua El Jefe is able to run today after weeks of limping & barely walking.
2. Got a new client whom I'm excited to work with!
3. Got to catch up with more on the phone today & we had a great chat about her coming to the Olympics.
Why it Works?

• *Three Things I am Thankful For*
• Think too much about what goes wrong
  – Evolution?
• Reflect too little on what goes right and why
• Focus on negative = depression, anxiety
• This exercise helps us to learn how to focus on the positives
Gratitude Exercise
Gratitude Exercise

• Think of a person who did something that changed your life for the better
• Someone you never thanks properly
• Write a letter of gratitude to that person
• Be specific about what the person did and how it impacted your life
• Make an appointment with that person and read the letter
Gratitude Visit

• Who has helped you? Write a letter of appreciation

• Laminate it.

• Take it to that person, read the letter, and leave it.
WRITING A GRATITUDE LETTER...

DEAR ALAN,

THANK YOU FOR...

...WILL MAKE BOTH YOU AND THE RECIPIENT FEEL GREAT!

WRITING A SIMPLE GRATITUDE LETTER IS A PROVEN WIN-WIN #HAPPINESS #HABIT
Gratitude Letter Effect on Depressive Symptoms

![Graph showing the effect of gratitude letters on depressive symptoms over time.](image-url)
Gratitude Letter on Happiness

![Graph showing changes in happiness over time for placebo control and gratitude visit groups.](image)
Signature Strengths
Signature Strengths

• Take the signature strengths survey
  www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu
  – Long, take your time

• Using the results of survey, take one of your strengths and do something with it
Values in Action

• Created by Peterson & Seligman to “diagnose” strengths
• Cross cultural
• Six major areas
• Twenty-four specific areas
• Several studies show emphasizing strengths increases happiness
Six Areas of Strength

- Knowledge & Wisdom
- Courage & Firmness
- Humanity & Love
- Justice & Fairness
- Temperance
- Transcendence/Spirituality
KNOWLEDGE & WISDOM
1. Creativity
2. Curiosity
3. Love of learning
4. Wisdom / perspective
5. Open-mindedness

COURAGE & FIRMNESS
6. Bravery
7. Persistence
8. Integrity
9. Vitality

HUMANITY & LOVE
10. Give & receive love
11. Kindness
12. Social intelligence

JUSTICE & FAIRNESS
13. Citizenship
14. Fairness
15. Leadership

TEMPERANCE
16. Forgiveness / mercy
17. Modesty / humility
18. Prudence
19. Self-regulation

TRANSCENDENCE / SPIRITUAL
20. Appreciation of excellence and beauty
21. Gratitude
22. Hope
23. Humor
24. Spirituality
Why it Works?

• Which would help you be more successful in your life - knowing what your weaknesses are and attempting to improve on them or knowing your strengths and building on them?

• Focusing on strengths allow one to increase self-esteem and self-efficacy
Anonymous Good Deed
Anonymous Good Deeds

- As a goal, try to secretly serve someone each day
  - Write an anonymous thank you note to someone you admire
  - Pick up trash along a trail or road
  - Look for a chance to serve in a group

- Write about your service in your diary
DEAR SIR,
EVERY DAY I SEE YOU LEAVE OUR APARTMENT COMPLEX AND WALK TO YOUR JOB IN THE COLD, WIND, AND RAIN. WHATEVER YOUR REASONS MAY BE, I PRESUME THEY MIGHT HAVE TO DO WITH MONEY. I AM YOUR AVERAGE COLLEGE STUDENT WITH MORE COCKY RESPONSES THAN DOLLARS, AND I CAN SPARE NO MONEY. HOWEVER AT THE UNIVERSITY WE GET FREE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION. IN THE SPIRIT OF THE HOLIDAYS PLEASE ENJOY 20 FREE SUBWAY OR BUS RIDES LEFT ON THIS CARD!

CHEERS!
-A FRIEND
Left your window down, been there, thought I would try to help!
Just did a "Random Act of Kindness" for a complete stranger. I better go post my anonymous good deed on Facebook. I feel so happy!
Why it Works?

- When you do something for someone else, the act makes you feel good - “helpers high”
- When we engage in good deeds, research shows that we reduce our own stress
  – Physiological and psychological effects
Practice Mindfulness
**Practice Mindfulness**

• Try to stay in the present with regards to the activity and focus on just that activity and nothing else
  – It’s harder than it sounds
  – This is also done during yoga and meditation
• Just sit and focus on the present
• Try to do this several times a week, for at least a month
FOCUS ON FINDING THE BEAUTY IN WHATEVER IS IN FRONT OF YOU
Why it Works?

• Too often we focus our happiness on the future, instead of focusing on the present

• When we learn to focus on the present we
  – Start to see the joys of our everyday lives
  – Stop ruminating on past, troubling events
  – Learn not to worry about a future that has not happened yet
Be Kind/Compassionate
Be Kind/Compassionate

• Perhaps the most difficult
• Most of us have at least one person who makes us upset
• Plan activities with this person and practice being nice and showing compassion
• After each encounter, write about what you did, how you felt
• If you noticed changes in this person, write about those too
Too difficult? How about one of these...
Other Kind Acts

• Hold the door for a stranger
• Send a random hello email or text to a family member or friend you hardly ever see
• Give a compliment to someone at work or school
• Make a handmade card
• Bring donuts or bagels to work
• Help an elder with his or her groceries
• Say “I love you” to everyone you love
• Do a chore for someone who needs help
• Donate, Volunteer
• Listen to a friend
“When we feel love and kindness toward others, it not only makes others feel loved and cared for, but it helps us also to develop inner happiness and peace,” - Dalia Lama
Why it Works?

• Similar to the good deed
• Take the focus off of yourself, may allow you to let go of some of the daily problems
A couple of extras...
Describe Your Ideal Day
Appreciative Inquiry

• What do you like and appreciate?

• Based on that, what would life be like if you were able to have more?

• What can you do to increase the good things that you appreciate?
Smile More

• Many studies demonstrate that people who smile more are better liked
• Practice giving sincere compliments as you smile
• Put a pencil in your teeth and keep your lips from touching it, then watch a “comedy” that isn’t really funny (e.g., Friends)
  – It will seem much funnier to you
A Real Life

• Almost everyone wants to be happier or to feel happiness for longer time

• Here we have some practical tools to increase happiness – so what are we waiting for?
To summarize
Authentic Happiness

• Pleasure: The pleasant life
  – Small contribution to happiness
• Meaning: A life of significance
  – Social connection, service to others
  – Very Large contribution to happiness
• Engagement: a life of involvement
  – Expanding one’s gifts, doing interesting work
  – Large contribution

What Increases Happiness?

- Savoring (antidote to habituation): Practicing Mindfulness
- Increase Social skills: Be Kind/Compassionate, Good Deed
- Optimism & Zest: 3 Blessings
- A sense of mission: Signature Strengths
- Express Gratitude: Gratitude Exercise & service
What Does It All Mean?!?

Remember:

• *Positive psychology enables you to develop a more resilient psychological immune system based on optimism and self-esteem*
• Appreciate and amplify what works
• *You can learn to be happier!*
References


Some Additional References


More References


References


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