POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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Positive Psychology

Structural Notes:

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Attribution and Definition when needed are H3; all others start at H2

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: Introduction to Positive Psychology

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1.1: Introduction to Positive Psychology

- Describe what positive psychology is, who started it, and why it came into existence.
- Identify some of the most important findings from the science of positive psychology with respect to forgiveness, gratitude, and humility.
- Explore how positive psychology might make a difference in how you think about your own life, the nature of human nature, and what is really important to you.

What is Positive Psychology?

📌 WATCH List

Watch What is Positive Psychology?[1], a video by the Test Prep Gurus introducing the concept of Positive Psychology. They will briefly cover topics of well-being, mindfulness, flow, learned optimism, and more!

In 1998, Martin Seligman, who was then president of the American Psychological Association, urged psychologists to focus more on understanding how to build human strength and psychological well-being. In deliberately setting out to create a new direction and new orientation for psychology, Seligman helped establish a growing movement and field of research called positive psychology (Compton, 2005)[2]. In a very general sense, positive psychology can be thought of as the science of happiness; it is an area of study that seeks to identify and promote those qualities that lead to greater fulfillment in our lives. This field looks at people's strengths and what helps individuals to lead happy, contented lives, and it moves away from focusing on people's pathology, faults, and problems.

According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000)[3], positive psychology, at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and… happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom.

Some of the topics studied by positive psychologists include altruism and empathy, creativity, forgiveness and compassion, the importance of positive emotions, enhancement of immune system functioning, savoring the fleeting moments of life, and strengthening virtues as a way to increase authentic happiness (Compton, 2005)[4]. Recent efforts in the field of positive psychology have focused on extending its principles toward peace and well-being at the level of the global community. In a war-torn world in which conflict, hatred, and distrust are common, such an extended "positive peace psychology" could have important implications for understanding how to overcome oppression and work toward global peace (Cohrs, Christie, White, & Das, 2013)[5]. (Spielman et al., 2020)[28].

Throughout most of its history, psychology was concerned with identifying and remedying human ills. It has largely focused on decreasing maladaptive emotions and behaviors, while generally ignoring positive and optimal functioning. In contrast, the goal of positive psychology is to identify and enhance the human strengths and virtues that make life worth living. Unlike the positive thinking or new thought movements that are associated with people like Norman Vincent Peale or Rhonda Byrne (The Secret), positive psychology pursues scientifically informed perspectives on what makes life worth living. It is empirically based. It focuses on measuring aspects of the human condition that lead to happiness, fulfillment, and flourishing.

Moving from an exclusive focus on distress, disorder, and dysfunction, positive psychology shifts the scientific lens to a concentration on well-being, health, and optimal functioning. Positive psychology provides a different vantage point through which to understand human experience. Recent developments have produced a common framework that locates the study of positive states, strengths and virtues in relation to each other and links them to important life outcomes. Recent developments suggest that problems in psychological functioning may be more profitably dealt with as the absence, excess, or opposite of these strengths rather than traditional diagnostic categories of mental illness. The principal claim of positive psychology is that the study of health, fulfillment and well-being is as deserving of study as illness, dysfunction, and distress, and has resonated well with both the academic community and the general public.

Understanding the VIA Classification of Character Strengths

As a relatively new field of research, positive psychology lacked a common vocabulary for discussing measurable positive traits before 2004. Traditional psychology benefited from the creation of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), which provided researchers and clinicians with the same set of language from which they could talk about the negative. As a first step in remedying this disparity between traditional and positive psychology, Chris Peterson and Martin Seligman set out to identify, organize and measure character. The **Values in Action (VIA)** classification of strengths was an important initial step toward specifying important positive traits (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)[6]. Peterson and Seligman examined ancient cultures (including their religions, politics, education and philosophies) for information about how people in the past construed human virtue. The researchers looked for virtues that were present across cultures and time. Six core virtues emerged from their analysis: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, transcendence and wisdom. The VIA is the positive psychology counterpart to the DSM used in traditional psychology and psychiatry. Unlike the DSM, which scientifically categorizes human deficits and disorders, the VIA classifies positive human strengths. This approach vastly departs from the medical model of traditional psychology, which focuses on fixing deficits. In contrast, positive psychologists emphasize that people should focus and build upon what they are doing well.

The VIA is a tool by which people can identify their own character strengths and learn how to capitalize on them. It consists of 240 questions that ask respondents to report the degree to which statements reflecting each of the strengths apply to themselves. For example, the character strength of hope is measured with items that include ''I know that I will succeed with the goals I set for myself.'' The strength of gratitude is measured with such items as ''At least once a day, I stop and count my blessings.''

Within the United States, the most commonly endorsed strengths are kindness, fairness, honesty, gratitude and judgment (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2005)[7]. Worldwide, the following strengths were most associated with positive life satisfaction: hope, zest, gratitude and love. The researchers called these strengths of the heart. Moreover, strengths associated with knowledge, such as love of learning and curiosity, were least correlated with life satisfaction (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2005)[8]. (Emmons, 2024)[29].

> **? Guiding Questions**
>
> 1. What is Positive Psychology?
> 2. What led to the field of Positive Psychology
> 3. What is the difference between learned optimism and learned helplessness?
> 4. What are the pillars of positive psychology?
> 5. What is the problem with the disease model of psychology?
> 6. What is eudaimonia vs. hedonia?
> 7. What is learned optimism?
> 8. What are the different types of "lives" Dr. Seligman proposes?

Supplementary Material

- For those of you who found this too simple and need a bit more detail on the background of Positive Psychology, What (and Why) is Positive Psychology?[9] by Gable et al. may help.
- Learn more about Martin Seligman life and contribution to the field of Positive Psychology from the National Endowment for the Humanities featured article[10] (2020) and watch him discuss The new era of positive psychology[11], hosted by TED Talks (2004).
- The PERMA model, introduced by psychologist Martin Seligman, is a framework for understanding and enhancing well-being, encompassing five key elements: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. By emphasizing these components, the PERMA model provides a holistic approach to cultivating happiness and fulfillment in individuals' lives. Read more about his PERMA Model[12].

> **✎ Definition: Values in Action (VIA)**
>
> tool by which people can identify their own character strengths and learn how to capitalize on them. It consists of 240 questions that ask respondents to report the degree to which statements reflecting each of the strengths apply to themselves.

Attribution

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1.2: Affective Forcasting

Exploring Emotional Predicting

This Psychology Today article[13] explores the concept of affective forecasting, examining how individuals predict and anticipate their emotional reactions to future events, often with notable inaccuracies. Timothy Wison and Daniel Gilbert also discuss affective forecasting in this paper called, Knowing What to Want[14] (2005).

An important point should be considered regarding happiness.People are often poor at **affective forecasting**: predicting the intensity and duration of their future emotions (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003)[15]. In one study, nearly all newlywed spouses predicted their marital satisfaction would remain stable or improve over the following four years; despite this high level of initial optimism, their marital satisfaction actually declined during this period (Lavner, Karner, & Bradbury, 2013)[16].

In addition, we are often incorrect when estimating how our long-term happiness would change for the better or worse in response to certain life events. For example, it is easy for many of us to imagine how euphoric we would feel if we won the lottery, were asked on a date by an attractive celebrity, or were offered our dream job. It is also easy to understand how long-suffering fans of the Chicago Cubs baseball team, which had not won a World Series championship since 1908, thought they would feel permanently elated when their team finally won another World Series in 2016. Likewise, it is easy to predict that we would feel permanently miserable if we suffered a disabling accident or if a romantic relationship ended. (Spielman et al., 2020)[30].

> 📌 WATCH List
>
> Watch Dan Gilbert, a very well known affective forecasting researcher discuss The surprising science of happiness[17] in his 2012 TED Talk.

? Guiding Questions

1. What is Affective Forecasting?
2. What is an impact bias and why is it important?
3. Are people good or bad at forecasting their future happiness? Why or why not?
4. What is "sense making" and how is it relevant to negative events?

✎ Definition: Affective Forecasting

predicting the intensity and duration of their future emotions

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1.3: Three Key Strengths and Pursuing Positive Emotion

Forgiveness, **gratitude**, and **humility** are three key strengths that have been the focus of sustained research programs within positive psychology. What have we learned about each of these and why do these matter for human flourishing?

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is essential to harmonious long-term relationships between individuals, whether between spouses or nations, dyads or collectives. At the level of the individual, forgiveness of self can help one achieve an inner peace as well as peace with others and with God. Wrongdoing against others can result in guilt, and self-loathing. Resentment can give away to hate and intolerance. Both perpetrator and victim suffer. Conversely, forgiveness can be an avenue to healing.

It is the basic building block of loving relationships with others. When one person or nation does something to hurt another, the relationship between the two can be irrevocably damaged. Because the potential for conflict is seemingly built into human nature, the prospects for long-term peace may seem faint. Forgiveness offers another way. If the victim can forgive the perpetrator, the relationship may be restored and possibly even saved from termination. The essence of **forgiveness** is that it creates a possibility for a relationship to recover from the damage caused by the offending party's offense. Forgiveness is thus a powerful pro-social process. It can benefit human social life by helping relationships to heal. , on the social level, forgiveness may be the critical element needed for world peace. Culligan (2002)[18] wrote "Forgiveness may ultimately be the most powerful weapon for breaking the dreadful cycle of violence."

Research is answering fundamental questions about what forgiveness is and isn't, how it develops, what are its physiological correlates and physical effects, whether it is always beneficial, and how people—if they are so motivated—might be helped to forgive. Forgiveness is not excusing, condoning, tolerating, or forgetting that one has been hurt because of the actions of another. Forgiveness is letting go of negative thoughts (e.g. wishing the offender harm), negative behaviors (e.g. a desire to retaliate, and negative feelings (e.g. resentment) toward the offender (McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006)[19] .

There have been numerous studies looking at forgiveness interventions. The interventions involved counseling and exercises which were used to help people move from anger and resentment towards forgiveness. In one study, incest survivors who experienced the forgiveness intervention had at the end of the intervention increased abilities to forgive others, increased hopefulness and decreased levels of anxiety and depression. In another study, college students were randomized to a group that received a forgiveness education program and another group who studied human relations. The group that received the forgiveness education program showed higher levels of hope and an increased willingness to forgive others. This greater self-forgiveness was associated with increased self-esteem, lower levels of anxiety, lower levels of depression and a more positive view of their patient.

In many of these studies, it was shown that people who are able to forgive are more likely to have better interpersonal functioning and therefore social support. The act of forgiveness can result in less anxiety and depression, better health outcomes, increased coping with stress, and increased closeness to God and others (Enright, 2001)[20]. (Emmons, 2024)[30].

Gratitude

Gratitude is a feeling of appreciation or thankfulness in response to receiving a benefit. The emerging science of gratitude has produced some important findings. From childhood to old age, accumulating evidence documents the wide array of psychological, physical, and relational benefits associated with gratitude (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010)[21]. Gratitude is important not only because it helps us feel good, but also because it inspires us to do good. Gratitude heals, energizes, and transforms lives in a myriad of ways consistent with the notion that virtue is both its own reward and produces other rewards (Emmons, 2007)[22].

To give a flavor of these research findings, dispositional gratitude has been found to be positively associated qualities such as empathy, forgiveness, and the willingness to help others. For example, people who rated themselves as having a grateful disposition perceived themselves as having more socially helpful characteristics, expressed by their empathetic behavior, and emotional support for friends within the last month (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002)[23]. In our research, when people report feeling grateful, thankful, and appreciative in their daily lives, they also feel more loving, forgiving, joyful, and enthusiastic. Notably, the family, friends, partners and others who surround them consistently report that people who practice gratitude are viewed as more helpful, more outgoing, more optimistic, and more trustworthy (Emmons & McCullough, 2003)[24].

Expressing gratitude for life's blessings – that is, a sense of wonder, thankfulness and appreciation– is likely to elevate happiness for a number of reasons. Grateful thinking fosters the savoring of positive life experiences and situations, so that people can extract the maximum possible satisfaction and enjoyment from their circumstances. Counting one's blessings may directly counteract the effects of hedonic adaptation, the process by which our happiness level returns, again and again, to its set range, by preventing people from taking the good things in their lives for granted. If we consciously remind ourselves of our blessings, it should become harder to take them for granted and adapt to them. And the very act of viewing good things as gifts itself is likely to be beneficial for mood.

How much does it matter? Consider these eye-popping statistics. People are 25% happier if they keep gratitude journals, sleep 1/2 hour more per evening, and exercise 33% more each week compared to persons who are not keeping journals. They achieve up to a 10% reduction in systolic blood pressure, and decrease their dietary fat intake by up to 20%. Lives marked by frequent positive emotions of joy, love and gratitude are up to 7 years longer than lives bereft of these pleasant feelings.

The science of gratitude has also revealed some surprising findings. For example, students who practice gratitude increase their grade point average. Occasional gratitude journaling boosts well-being more than the regular practice of counting blessings. Remembering one's sorrows, failures, and other painful experiences is more beneficial to happiness than recalling only successes. Becoming aware that a very pleasant experience is about to end enhances feelings of gratitude for it. Thinking about the absence of something positive in your life produces more gratitude and happiness than imagining its presence. (Emmons, 2024)[31].

Humility

One aspect of humility is an awareness of the relatively little that one can really know about the world.

What is humility and why does it matter? Although the etymological roots of humility are in lowliness and self-abasement (from the Latin term humilis meaning "lowly, humble," or literally "on the ground" and from the Latin term humus meaning "earth"), the emerging consensus among scholars is that **humility** is a psychological and intellectual virtue, or a character strength.

There is no simple definition but it seems to involve the following elements: A clear and accurate (not underestimated) sense of one's abilities and achievements; the ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations (often with reference to a "higher power"); an openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice keeping one's abilities and accomplishments in perspective; relatively low self-focus or an ability to "forget the self"; appreciation of the value of all things, as well as the many different ways that people and things can contribute to our world.

In contemporary society, it is easy to overlook the merits of humility. In politics, business and sports, the egoists command our attention. In contrast, the primary message of this book is that the unassuming virtue of humility, rather than representing weakness or inferiority, as is commonly assumed, is a strength of character that produces positive, beneficial results for self and society. Successful people are humble people. They are more likely to flourish in life, in more domains, than are people who are less humble (Exline & Hill, 2012)[25].

Do you think you are you a humble person? For obvious reasons, you cannot rate your own level of humility. It's an elusive concept to get at scientifically. "I am very humble" is self-contradictory. This has not discouraged personality psychologists from developing questionnaires to get at it, albeit indirectly. For example, to what extent do you identify with each of the following statements:

1. I generally have a good idea about the things I do well or do poorly.
2. I have difficulty accepting advice from other people.
3. I try my best in things, but I realize that I have a lot of work to do in many areas.
4. I am keenly aware of what little I know about the world.

> Questions such as these tap various facets of the humble personality, including an appreciation and recognition of one's limitations, and an accurate assessment of oneself.

Humble people are more likely to flourish in life, in more domains, than are people who are less humble. Consider a handful of findings from recent research studies and surveys:

- People who say they feel humble when they are praised report that the experience made them want to be nice to people, increase their efforts, and challenge themselves
- Humble people are more admired and the trait of humility is viewed positively by most
- Humble teachers are rated as more effective and humble lawyers as more likeable by jurors
- CEO's who possessed a rare combination of extreme humility and strong professional will were catalysts for transforming a good company into a great one
- Over 80% of adults surveyed indicated that it is important that professionals demonstrate modesty/humility in their work
- Humility is positively associated with academic success in the form of higher grades (Exline & Hill, 2012)[26]. (Emmons, 2024)[32]

Pursuing Positive Emotions

In this section, we explored several strengths that can be utilized to cultivate positive emotions. However, it's worth noting, as highlighted in the The Paradoxical Effects of Pursuing Positive Emotion, When and Why Wanting to Feel Happy Backfires[27] by Ford & Mauss (2013), that there may exist some paradoxical consequences associated with the pursuit of positive emotions.

> **? Guided Questions**
>
> 1. Why does chasing happiness sometimes have a paradoxical outcome?
> 2. What are some things you can do to prevent pursuing happiness from resulting in harm?
> 3. What are some activities tied to reduced happiness?

Definitions

Forgiveness

creates a possibility for a relationship to recover from the damage caused by the offending party's offense

Gratitude

feeling of appreciation or thankfulness in response to receiving a benefit

Humility

A clear and accurate sense of one's abilities and achievements; the ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations (often with reference to a "higher power"); an openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice keeping one's abilities and accomplishments in perspective; relatively low self-focus or an ability to "forget the self"; appreciation of the value of all things, as well as the many different ways that people and things can contribute to our world

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Embracing Positive Emotions

2.1: Measurements and Concepts of Happiness and Well-being

> **◑ Learning Objectives**
>
> Upon reading this chapter, the reader should be able to:
>
> - Familiarize yourself with the measurement of positive emotion and its role in the field of Positive Psychology, as well as several positive emotion theories
> - Understand the value of positive emotions (e.g., what they are associated with, their function)

A Journey into Well-Being and Happiness

> **📌 WATCH List**
>
> Dr. Barbara Fredrickson, a leading scholar in the field of positive psychology, explains simple ways that you can enhance positive emotions in your life in her video, 2-Minute Tips: How to be more positive[1].
>
>
>
> Also, watch Dr. Fredrickson discuss how positive emotions open our minds[2] and broadens our awareness of the world, allowing us to become more in tune with the needs of others.
>
> Here you can watch Sonja Lyubomirsky, a happiness researcher, shedding light on how much of our happiness is determined by our genes, and how much is within our power to control in her video, What Determines Happiness?[3]
>
> Watch Ron Gutman reviews a collection of studies about smiling in his TED Talk titled, The hidden power of smiling[4] and note down some examples of research study findings on smiling as you watch.

> **⚙ READ List**
>
> Read the following website overview on Eudaimonic Well-Being[5], including the definition, meaning, and examples, written by Arasteh Gatchpazian.

Happiness is a state of well-being characterized by emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy, typically subjectively defined by the person, characterized by more positive than negative emotions, and the sense that one is progressing towards goals (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006)[6]. Note that subjective well-being is used Interchangeably with Happiness, but happiness can also simply be one of the positive emotions. Although, this is very subjective and the term is often used interchangeably with well-being. Academic Psychologists and researchers in Psychology rarely use the term "happiness" to mean the broad characterization the public usually means. For now we will say happiness is a specific example of a "positive emotion".

Hedonic and Eudaimonic Perspectives

Subjective often refers to emotions, leading us to examine subjective well-being. **Subjective Well-Being (SWB)** is how people experience the quality of their life in both emotional reactions (negative and positive emotions) and cognitive judgment. SWB is a **hedonic** approach of understanding emotions since there is a focus on pleasure and pain as indicators of well-being. On the contrary, the **eudaimonic** well-being approach focuses on personal meaning, growth, and positive functioning which comes from living a "good life" in line with your authentic self. Think about Maslow's hierarchy of needs where a sense of belonging & **self-actualization** reside at the top of the pyramid.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Self-actualization	Inner fulfillment
Esteem	Self-worth, accomplishment, confidence
Social	Family, friendship, intimacy, belonging
Security	Safety, employment, assets
Physiological	Food, water, shelter, warmth

7

One thing to note is the difference between terminology within hedonic measures. Positive emotion, for example, is specific to qualities that are temporary or fleeting. These can be seen as emotions that occur only in certain circumstances or for a short period of time. Positive mood is in the middle of hedonic and eudaimonic measures as it refers to a feeling of positivity or happiness that someone experiences over a period of time. Trait Positive affect is closer to Eudaimonic measures because it refers to a long lasting positive experience. People high in trait positive affect tend to have optimistic outlooks on life and bounce back more easily from setbacks or negative experiences.

Studying happiness requires understanding that positive and negative feelings are somewhat independent of one another. We must study them separately to get the full picture of emotional affect.

So, what are the causes of happiness? There are three causes that we will touch on. First, your goal and needs being satisfied. You need to have your basic needs met for pleasure. Secondly, keeping yourself active and engaging in things that are intrinsically rewarding. Doing things is what gives us joy and when we are doing things we enjoy and that we are good at, we tend to experience a state of **flow**, or being in the zone.

The most basic way to measure happiness is to simply ask people. A very simple way of doing this, often used on children, is showing different faces ranging from happy to sad. People are then asked to point to the face that expresses how they are feeling. Another way of measuring happiness is to measure positive emotions using single item happiness scales and multi item emotion scales. One example of a single item scale is asking people "how happy are you?" which is an older methodology, but still practiced today. One study showed that the single question of "how happy are you today?" predicted how long you live (Steptoe et al., 2012)[8]. A very common multi-item emotion scale is the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) which includes 20 items with an extended version of 60 items (PANAS –X).

In the next section, we will focus on implicit methods of measuring happiness.

> **? Guiding Questions**
>
> 1. What are some characteristics of happy people?
> 2. What is the happiness pie chart (Lyubomirsky)?
> 3. What are some good mottos and strategies to be happy in the moment? (Fredrickson)
> 4. What does it mean that positive emotions "open our minds"?
> 5. What is the difference between hedonia and eudaimonia?
> 6. What is the Maslow hierarchy of needs?
> 7. What are the components of the Carol Ryff model of Well-Being?
> 8. What is self-determination theory and how does it relate to Eudaimonia?

Definitions

Happiness

state of well-being characterized by emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy, typically subjectively defined by the person, characterized by more positive than negative emotions, and the sense that one is progressing towards goals

Subjective Well-Being (SWB)

how people experience the quality of their life in both emotional reactions (negative and positive emotions) and cognitive judgment

Hedonia/Hedonism[21]

refers to the prioritization of pleasure in one's lifestyle, actions, or thoughts

Eudaimonia

living a life that is fulfilling and finding meaning in everyday life

Self-Actualization[22]

a need that essentially equates to achieving one's full potential, and it can only be realized when needs lower on the pyramid have been met

Flow[20]

being in the zone, or fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity

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2.2: Smiles

Duchenne Smiles

Duchenne smiles are smiles that involve the whole face – including the upper cheek (zygomaticus major) and eye muscles (orbicularis oculi), not just the mouth muscles. In comparison to "polite" smiles, Duchenne smiles seem to glow, showing observers that the smiler is experiencing genuine positive emotion. Thus, people who often display Duchenne smiles are likely to be happier people, in general. Furthermore, given what we know about what causes happiness, they may even be more moral, virtuous, and eudaimonically motivated people.

The Duchenne smile is named after the French neurologist Guillaume Duchenne, who pointed out in the mid-1800s that there are two very different kinds of smiles. Non-Duchenne smiles can mean a lot of things: polite smiles used to be friendly, communicate how you are feeling, or even be "put on" for a photo. Generally, human smiles express joy or acceptance, but some cultures use smiles to show embarrassment or confusion. There are also flirtatious smiles, fear smiles, pain smiles and more.

A summary of all the types of smiles and the meanings behind them can be found in this news article[9] describing the types of smiles by science journalist, Zaria Gorvett.

We can measure lots of emotions with facial expression– it's much easier now thanks to digital technology that can use long established coding systems rapidly. Studies use Yearbook photos, baseball cards etc. to tie smiling to interesting things like survival, divorce etc with smilers generally doing better. Researcher Ken Sheldon points out that Duchenne Smiles are honest signals that contain evolutionary value that alerts perceivers to the virtuous behaviors and motivations of the smiler, to create a sense of connection between smilers and perceivers, and to elicit more cooperation from perceivers.

Interestingly, there are major cultural differences in smiling with a possible impact on country happiness. Americans smile the most of any country with Russians smiling the least. More than 50% of people will return a smile due to powerful mimicry instincts. As a result, this can spread happiness thanks to "The Facial Feedback Hypothesis" which is the idea that faking an emotion can stimulate it. Although there has been some controversy and debate on The Facial Feedback Hypothesis, there still seems to be at least a small effect. Another interesting fact research has shown is that countries with higher immigrant populations smile more.

The **Facial Feedback hypothesis** is the theory that facial movement can influence emotional experience. For example, an individual who is forced to smile during a social event will actually come to find the event more of an enjoyable experience.

Havas and friends explore the evidence of facial movement affecting cognition and emotional reactivity, specifically in botox patients in their paper titled, Cosmetic Use of Botulinum Toxin-A Affects Processing of Emotional Language[10].

In conclusion, facial expressions can be utilized to influence and assess emotions effectively.

Smiling, as we have discussed, is an interesting and useful way to measure well-being. It has also become an interesting area of study in positive psychology as a way to trigger emotions, understand relationships, predict the future, and more.

If you enjoyed learning about Duchenne Smiles, Sheldon and colleagues discuss Duchenne Smiles as Honest Signals of Chronic Positive Mood[11] (2021).

> ✏️ Definition: Facial Feedback Hypothesis
>
> theory that facial movement can influence emotional experience

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2.3: The Function of Positive Emotion

Positive and Negative Emotions

Negative emotions have a lot of specific action tendencies that keep us alive.

For example:

- Fear → run away
- Disgust → spit out
- Anger → fight

All negative emotions involve focusing and attention narrowing. So, what does feeling positive do for you?

Positive emotions help us think more creatively and creatively problem solve. They also widen our attentional scope and open us to experiences. The broaden and build theory, for example, says that positive emotions help widen our thoughts and actions.

How is this helpful to survival, do you think? Positive emotions generally communicate safety to both oneself and others, often through actions like smiling. Consequently, these emotions facilitate the formation of relationships, provide support, and contribute to the development of skills and health.

Additionally, we will explore a couple hypotheses regarding the advantages of positive emotions starting with the undoing hypothesis. In psychology, **the undoing hypothesis** suggests that experiencing positive emotions after stressful situations can help alleviate their effects (i.e., psychological arousal and negative impact of the initial experience). Similarly, **the stress buffering hypothesis** proposes that social support can help protect individuals from the negative effects of stress.

Positive emotions can change:

1. How you appraise stress
2. How you respond to stress
3. How you recover from stress

Read Does Positive Affect Influence Health?[12], by Dr. Sarah D. Pressman and Dr. Sheldon Cohen, a paper on the association of **positive affect (PA)** and physical health.

Some other benefits of positive emotions include:

- Marker that we are flourishing
- Leads to growth, wellness, and better relationships over time
- Reduces/Cancels/Offers resilience against stress
- Resource when coping with (e.g., positive affect (PA) itself can produce esteem, confidence)
- Triggers <u>upward spirals</u> → finding meaning in bad → triggers PA → broadens thinking → find more meaning

Dr. Barbara Fredrickson and Dr. Thomas Joiner examine how positive emotions trigger upward spirals toward emotional well-being[13] (2002) to learn about the original work on the idea of upward spiraling.

The Broaden and Build Theory

The broaden and build theory (previously mentioned) tells us that positive emotions may activate us but in broad ways (versus negative that narrows us).

- Joy: play, be creative
- Content: savor the moment
- Pride: share good news
- Interest: explore

> These positive emotions broaden our awareness and encourages novel and exploratory thoughts and actions. Over time, this builds skills and resources.

Resource building through Broaden & Building:

- Intellectual Resources:
  - Develops problem solving skills
  - Learn new information
- Social Resources:
  - Strengthen existing bonds (e.g., friends, spouse)
  - Makes new bonds
- Physical Resources
  - Develops coordination
  - Develops strengths & cardiovascular health
- Psychological Resources

- Develops resilience & optimism
- Develops sense of identity

Positive psych interventions (PPI) are simple positive activities that increase well-being. Although PPIs (positive psych interventions) have generally been shown to be effective (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009)[14], not every positive activity that a person performs will increase their well-being. To understand when a PPI will work and why it sometimes doesn't, it helps to understand the "active ingredients" that contribute to their success, i.e., the ones that need to be present to build wellbeing. A central active ingredient in PPIs is positive emotions. Recent advances in affective science provide a solid foundation to understand both the specificity and variety of positive emotions. We're beyond simple/basic positive vs. negative categories.

Examples of Positive Psych Interventions (PPI):

• Writing letters expressing gratitude	• Acts of kindness
• Cultivating strengths	• Visualize positive future self
• Meditate	• Count blessings
• Savoring	

The positive activity model (Layous & Lymbomirsky 2013)[15] focuses on promoting well-being through engaging in activities that generate positive emotions and foster personal growth. This explains how simple activities change well-being. Moderators play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of activities aimed at increasing happiness. Various features of the activity, including dosage, variety, sequence, and the presence of built-in social support, can influence their success in boosting happiness levels.

For instance, greater variety is often associated with better outcomes, and certain activities may serve as better "starter" options. Moreover, different activities may have varying efficacy at different doses, and factors like whether they are outer-focused or inner-focused can interact with cultural differences, such as collectivist versus individualistic societies and time orientation. Additionally, individual characteristics, such as motivation to become happier, belief in the effectiveness of the activities, level of depression, and demographic factors, also influence the outcomes. Furthermore, the fit between the person and the activity is crucial, as enjoying an activity tends to lead to better overall results in terms of happiness enhancement.

One issue of this is that happiness is relative to your point of comparison. **The Social Comparison (SC) Theory** by Leon Festinger[16] states that individuals assess their own qualities and abilities by comparing themselves to others, which affects their self-esteem and emotions. In Social Comparison Theory, downward social comparison occurs when individuals compare themselves to others who they perceive as less fortunate, which has been linked to improved well-being in cancer patients. Conversely, upward social comparison can have both positive and negative effects, potentially serving as a source of inspiration or leading to a blow to one's self-esteem.

We generally hover around the same set point of well-being. The hedonic treadmill, also known as hedonic adaptation, is a theory positing that people repeatedly return to their baseline level of happiness, regardless of what happens to them. Changes that modify the impacts of exceptionally positive or negative events include contrast effects, where highly salient events diminish the influence of others, the introduction of new pleasures counteracted by the loss of old ones (such as gaining a large sum of money leading to new experiences but also diminishing the enjoyment of previous ones), and habituation, where the initial excitement or harm of something new gradually fades away, returning individuals to their baseline level of satisfaction.

Hedonic adaptation can be compared to a treadmill. The happiness treadmill, for example, is a concept where no matter how much running on it you do, you just stay in place (Deiner et al., 2009)[17]. We adapt pretty quickly (i.e., adapting to a bad smell). Our set point is based on our genetics and temperament.

Intentional activities matter because despite major positive or negative events or life changes, we quickly return to a relatively stable level of happiness. So, as a person makes more money, expectations and desires rise in tandem, which results in no permanent gain in happiness. Activities are the key to making lasting changes in happiness because such activities are more resistant to adaptation. We can deliberately engage in activities that make us happy while varying them enough to ward off adaptation.

> Interestingly, age matters for well-being too.

Interestingly, age matters for well-being too. The Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Susan Charles & Laura Carstensen, 2010)[18] states that the older we age, we focus less on negative emotions, engage more deeply with emotional content of days, and especially savor the good stuff (e.g., relationships). It's important to note that older people have a positivity bias where they remember good stuff more quickly and don't remember the bad stuff as much (Mather & Carstensen, 2005)[19].

In sum, we learned that positive emotions have functions that are different from negative emotions. These positive emotions are a key ingredient of intentional activities that can change our well-being. Well-being can be hard and slow to move (genetics, circumstances), but with intentional activities, we can change our daily positive emotions which can then change our behavior, deepen our well-being, and more.

Definitions

The Undoing Hypothesis
    experiencing positive emotions after stressful situations can help alleviate their effects

Stress Buffering Hypothesis
    proposes that social support can help protect individuals from the negative effects of stress

Positive Affect

the experience of pleasant emotions (i.e., happiness, joy, contentment)

The Positive Activity Model

focuses on promoting well-being through engaging in activities that generate positive emotions and foster personal growth

The Social Comparison (SC) Theory

individuals assess their own qualities and abilities by comparing themselves to others, which affects their self-esteem and emotions

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3: Gratitude and Awe- Pathways to Happiness

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3.1: Gratitude

> **◑ Learning Objectives**
>
> Upon reading this chapter, the reader should be able to:
>
> - Understand the concepts of gratitude and awe as key positive emotions studied in Positive Psychology, including their significance and implications for well-being.
> - Explore the effects of manipulating gratitude and awe in positive psychology interventions (PPIs), focusing on outcomes such as improvements in health, prosocial behavior, and overall well-being.
> - Examine the well-being benefits associated with exposure to nature, particularly in relation to inducing feelings of awe, and understand its role as a powerful positive psychology intervention (PPI), with examples like the impact of green spaces on happiness.

> **⚒ READ List**
>
> Dr. Tara Lomas and colleagues conducted a comprehensive study on gratitude interventions, concluding that gratitude can enhance mental health, relationships, and academic performance in both children and adults. Read their paper titled, *Gratitude Interventions: A Review and Future Agenda*[1].
>
> Afterwards, dive into this book on awe authored by Dr. Summer Allen, exploring *The Science of Awe*[2]. This short book traces the evolution of awe and outlines future research directions.
>
> Now, explore a paper by Dr. Colin Capaldi and colleagues called, *Flourishing in nature: A review of the benefits of connecting with nature and its application as a wellbeing intervention*[3], that examines our modern disconnection from nature and its impact on our wellbeing.
>
> Read this article by Summer Allen, published by the Greater Good Magazine on the *Eight Reasons Why Awe Makes Your Life Better*[4].

> **⚑ WATCH List**
>
> Watch this video by Kurzgesagt, titled *An Antidote to Dissatisfaction*[5], an overview of gratitude.
>
>

What is Gratitude?

Gratitude is an affirmation of goodness. When we regularly experience and express thankfulness we tend to not take things for granted and feel blessed in many circumstances. Another way of displaying gratitude is through causal inference, which is recognizing where the good thing is coming from. Individuals practice this by directing thanks to something/someone/the source that is outside of ourselves. This could take the form of a person, a spiritual force, etc.

One way researchers measure gratitude is through questionnaires. An example of that is The Gratitude Questionnaire. If you're interested in your gratitude score, you can complete the questionnaire[6].

Gratitude, when embraced as a form of savoring, is a widely practiced intervention that allows people to fully enjoy moments, even those as simple as indulging in a basic meal. Gratitude allows us to celebrate the present by appreciating the value of something and delaying the adaptation to positive events. Gratitude also blocks negative emotions like envy, resentment, and depression– it's almost impossible to be resentful and grateful simultaneously. Gratitude also comes with some noteworthy benefits including stress-resistance and strengthening of social ties and self-worth. If you recall from our previous chapter, the undoing hypothesis and stress-buffering hypothesis both suggest that positive emotions, such as gratitude can help "undo" the negative effects or act as a buffer against stress.

Let's talk about some ways to change your gratitude level:

- **Keep a gratitude journal**
  - Any practice that focuses our attention on grateful thinking (instead of boredom, apathy, negative thinking) is helpful.
- **Counting blessings (in your mind or on paper)**
- **Using visual reminders (especially helpful for kids)**
  - Helps overcome busyness, distraction, a good reminder.
- **Gratitude letters**
  - Writing a detailed letter to a person who has profoundly changed your life and then reading it to them.

Gratitude Interventions

The "Three Good Things" gratitude intervention entails reflecting on three positive aspects of your day and writing them down with specific reasons for gratitude. This fosters a mindset focused on the good despite daily challenges. Gratitude interventions offer benefits such as increased psychological well-being, including being more alert, attentive, and enthusiastic, as well as enhanced physical well-being, leading to better sleep, fewer physical symptoms, and improved self-care habits like exercise. Additionally, they contribute to social well-being by fostering compassion, helpfulness, and reducing feelings of loneliness.

As mentioned above, the gratitude letter is another way of expressing gratitude. Some would go as far as saying it's the more powerful version of journaling. Watch this 7-minute video of individuals participating in the gratitude letter intervention[7]. After watching the video, if you're interested in experiencing the remarkable physical and mental benefits of gratitude, you can follow these simple instructions to write your gratitude letter.

Step 1: Take a moment to think about someone who has positively impacted your life (whether in the short or long term) that you appreciate, yet may not have thanked properly.

Step 2: Write that person a letter describing how you feel about what they have done for you and why you are grateful to them. Seligman describes it as follows, it "should be concrete and about three hundred words: be specific" and mention how often you

remember what they did (Seligman, 2011, p. 30)[8].

Note: Rather than a simple thank you for being there, it is best to create a narrative. It may help to reflect on the following questions (modified from Intelligent Change, n.d.)[9]:

- How and when did you both meet?
- What are your earliest memories of your relationship?
- How was your life at the time?
- What has that person done for you?
- How did that make you feel then and now?
- What do they mean to you?

Step 3: While this may not always be an option–or at times the right thing to do–Seligman suggests you take time reading the letter and watch for the other person's reactions and your own. And then, when finished, discuss the content with them (Seligman, 2011, p. 30)[10].

> While writing gratitude letters holds inherent value for both sender and receiver, shorter notes, including electronic ones or cards, can be equally impactful.

Even a simple post-it note left as a surprise on someone's desk can have profound effects. These expressions of gratitude don't need to be lengthy; they just need to be sincere and heartfelt, serving as reminders of significant impacts and emotions. Additionally, while timely appreciation is ideal, gratitude knows no expiration date.

Now, shifting our focus to the science behind gratitude, a study conducted by Seligman in 2005 compared the effectiveness of gratitude letters with various other positive psychological interventions. The findings revealed that writing gratitude letters resulted in the most substantial initial increase in happiness, with effects lasting longer than many other interventions. This prolonged impact may be attributed to its unique ability not only to evoke positive emotions but also to strengthen the "R" in PERMA - relationships. This emphasis on nurturing relationships significantly enhances its overall impact on well-being.

Interestingly, certain cultures may not fully benefit from the gratitude letter activity. For example, individuals from backgrounds such as South Korean, Indian, Thai, and Asian Americans may not experience the same advantages from gratitude letters as Anglo-Americans do. Expressing appreciation for others' help might evoke mixed emotions for them, such as feelings of indebtedness, guilt, and regret. For further insights into the cultural aspects of gratitude, consider reading *Disentangling the Effects of Gratitude and Optimism: A Cross-Cultural Investigation*[11] by Milla Titova, Audrey Wagstaff, and Acacia Parks. Researcher Acacia Parks, an expert in gratitude, has heard from some Asian-American students that expressing thanks is uncomfortable because it attracts attention to them. One student even reported that her parents were insulted by her gratitude letter– as if it implied that she didn't expect them to be so generous.

Indeed, there are numerous ways to convey appreciation to those in our lives. Verbal gratitude, for instance, is the most typical method, simply involving the expression of "thank you" in some form. Concrete gratitude extends beyond mere words to encompass actions that reflect appreciation. This might involve offering a thoughtful gift, performing a helpful task, or expressing gratitude through a specific act of kindness tailored to the individual's preferences and interests. Connective gratitude transcends polite words, aiming to reciprocate in a manner deeply meaningful to the helper.

📌 WATCH List

Watch Christina Costa talk about *How Gratitude Rewires Your Brain*[12] in her 2022 TED Talk.

Get inspired by one of the many motivational talks on YouTube with this video by the Fearless Soul on *saying "Thank You"- A motivational video on the importance of gratitude*[13].

> **?** Guiding Questions
>
> 1. What is gratitude?
> 2. What are some of the consequences of gratitude?
> 3. How is gratitude related to humanity's success in surviving on planet earth?
> 4. What are some strategies to increase feelings of gratitude?
> 5. What are some of the downstream well-being benefits of experiencing awe?
> 6. What are the cognitive effects of awe?
> 7. How old is the science of awe and what impact does that have on the interpretation of the field?

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3.2: Awe

Experiencing Awe

Read this article authored by Leif Hass on *How Nature Helps Us Heal*[14] and discover why doctors recommend time outside.

Awe encompasses a profound perceptual vastness, compelling us to adjust our mental frameworks to embrace its magnitude. It arises in the face of something that defies our existing understanding of the world, often encountered amidst novelty or enormity. Though predominantly a positive emotional state, awe can also become a characteristic trait, shaping our ongoing perception and response to the world.

Experiencing awe is a profound journey that can be triggered by encounters with religion, nature, art, music, and the wonders of the natural world. It's a deeply personal and often transformative experience that is surprisingly very accessible.

Two themes tend to emerge from these encounters:

1. Feeling of being smaller in the presence of something greater than the self
2. Motivation to be good to others

The Purpose of Awe

Ever wondered about the purpose of awe? Well, it turns out, awe serves a crucial role as the ultimate collective emotion. This theory was proposed by Dr. Dacher Keltner from UC Berkeley and Dr. Jonathan Haidt from NYU. They argue that experiencing awe motivates us to engage in behaviors that contribute to the greater good, shifting our attention from personal interests to the well-being of our communities. Dr. Paul Piff and Dr. Pia Dietze also have recent work that confirms that dispositional awe is associated with more generosity in an economic game. Recent studies by Dr. Paul Piff and Dr. Pia Dietze at the University of California, Irvine further support this notion, revealing that dispositional awe correlates with increased generosity in economic games. Moreover, inducing awe has been found to enhance ethical decision-making and generosity, while simply being in an awe-inspiring environment fosters greater prosocial behavior.

Read more about Dr. Paul Piff and Dr. Pia Dietze's *Awe, the small self, and prosocial behavior*[15].

Also, if you would like to hear Dr. Paul Piff discuss his work and the art & science of *Awe*, you can watch his brief talk called: *Can Awe Combat Narcissism?*[16]

Have you ever come across a video or piece of literature that truly inspired awe within you? These kinds of experiences often share two key elements. Firstly, they create a sense of vastness, whether it's through breathtaking landscapes or remarkable displays of courage. Secondly, they have a way of reshaping our perspective on the world, making our daily concerns seem trivial or expanding our beliefs about human potential.

? **Guiding Questions**

1. What are some of the health benefits of nature
2. What is ART (attention restoration theory)?
3. How does the topic of awe relate to nature?

Attribution

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3.3: Does Awe Have a Physiological Signal?

Physical Signs of Experiencing Awe

The experience of awe is indeed accompanied by physiological responses. Goosebumps, for instance, are caused by the contraction of tiny muscles around hair follicles, resulting in the hair standing slightly on end. This reaction is an involuntary response of the sympathetic nervous system, shared by many animals. It serves a protective function, causing animals to appear larger in threatening situations, such as the puffing up of a puffer fish. Additionally, this response aids in retaining body heat in animals.

Goosebumps can be triggered by various stimuli, including moving music, captivating art, and moments of awe, as well as feelings of pride, excitement, and fear. In a study conducted by Schurtz et al. (2012)[17], participants reported experiencing goosebumps in response to awe more frequently than any other emotion except cold. Furthermore, the intensity of the awe experienced correlated with the frequency of goosebumps occurrence.

It's possible that our society is experiencing a deficit in awe. With technology dominating our daily routines, we find ourselves spending less time immersed in the wonders of nature and more time glued to screens. Moreover, the convenience of technology may be contributing to a decline in attendance at live art events, as people opt to experience these events through digital platforms on their phones. This shift is not only altering our relationship with art and nature but also contributing to a rise in narcissism and social disconnection. Researchers have turned to nature as a solution.

Why is Nature Beneficial to Well-Being?

1. Biophilia
2. Attention Restoration Theory (ART)
3. Stress Reduction

Biophilia is our intrinsic human tendency to seek connections with nature and other living beings. Its roots lie in the Greek words for "life" and "love or affection," giving it the literal meaning of "love of life." The Biophilia Hypothesis, proposed by Kellert and Wilson in 1993, suggests that humans depend on nature for more than just physical needs. It encompasses our desire for aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive, and spiritual fulfillment (Kellert, 1993, p. 21)[18]. Even as we increasingly inhabit urban environments, our intrinsic need to connect with nature persists, stemming from our ancestral need to engage with the natural world for survival.

The **Attention Restoration Theory (ART)** suggests that individuals experience improved concentration following exposure to natural settings or even visual imagery of nature. Directed attention is a limited resource. Directed attention is a finite resource; when depleted, it leads to negative feelings such as irritability and diminished cognitive function. Nature offers abundant stimuli that engages involuntary attention, allowing individuals to engage without conscious effort. While philosophically, nature has been revered as a wellspring of tranquility and vitality, rigorous scientific investigation into these notions has only gained momentum in the past three decades.

For an environment to be restorative it must include:

1. *Fascination*: the ability of an environment to generate awe in people; the amount of awe can give the directed attention a rest as the involuntary attention appears in its place.
2. *Being away*: a feeling that can be objective or subjective.
3. *Extension*: the connection between each element found in an environment; the feeling of being able to travel through the environment in order to look for the information it provides.
4. *Compatibility*: characteristics found in an environment that meet the preferences and goals of a person.

You will watch a brief 4-minute video of Yosemite.

- Ask yourself before you watch this video of Yosemite[19] – how much mental fatigue do you have right now. Then again once it's over, see if you feel any different in fatigue, attention, restoration, mood etc.

Watch Shannon Barlow discuss the Attention Restoration Theory (ART)[20] in a 3-minute video.

Contact with Nature

Decades of research support the notion that contact with nature, including exposure to unthreatening natural environments beneficial for human wellbeing and survival as suggested by Roger Ulrich's work, triggers automatic stress reduction psychophysiological responses. This includes decreased arousal and perceived stress, essentially promoting a sense of recovery or "undoing." Elements such as running water sounds and views of trees are known to be particularly effective in this regard. Studies have shown tangible health improvements, including reductions in blood pressure and enhancements in immune function, further emphasizing the positive impact of nature on our overall well-being and stress levels.

Patients who had a window view of trees following surgery experienced shorter hospital stays compared to those with views of a brick wall, spending an average of 7.96 days versus 8.7 days, a statistically significant difference ($p = .025$). Additionally, they required fewer pain medications. Furthermore, observations revealed that patients with a view of the brick wall received more negative notes, reporting feelings of upset and crying, in contrast to those with a nature view who were noted to be in good spirits. In summary, in comparison with the wall-view group, the patients with the tree view had shorter postoperative hospital stays, had fewer negative evaluative comments from nurses, took fewer moderate and strong analgesic doses, and had slightly lower scores for minor post-surgical complications[21].

Read more about how a view through a window may influence recovery from surgery[22], a study by Roger Ulrich (1984).

There is even evidence that images of nature can be beneficial. Why Is Nature Beneficial?: The Role of Connectedness to Nature[23] by Frantz and colleagues suggests that exposure to images of nature, whether through direct experience or videos, enhances attention, positive emotions, and problem-solving abilities, with particularly pronounced benefits observed among individuals who engage in outdoor activities (2008).

Spending time in nature offers a multitude of benefits for mental and emotional well-being. It can lead to improved attention and reduced mental fatigue, lower levels of stress and anxiety, and a better overall mood, including a heightened sense of positive affect such as awe. Moreover, regular exposure to nature is associated with a reduced risk of developing psychiatric disorders and promotes higher levels of empathy and cooperation. In a study led by Kristine Engemann and her team[24], it was discovered that children benefiting from exposure to green spaces have a distinct advantage, with research indicating a decreased likelihood of developing psychiatric disorders in adulthood. Researchers analyzed data from over 900,000 residents born between 1985 and 2003, revealing that those who grew up in neighborhoods with more green space had a significantly lower risk of various psychiatric disorders later in life, such as depression, mood disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, and substance use disorder. In fact, individuals with the lowest levels of green space exposure during childhood faced a 55% higher risk of developing mental illness compared to those who were surrounded by abundant green space during their formative years (2019).

Nature's sights and sounds often inspire profound awe, particularly the intricate fractal patterns in trees, clouds, rain, and birdsongs. These complex shapes, quickly detected by the human brain, are absent in urban environments. Studies indicate that exposure to nature, including images, can reduce stress and fatigue. Thus, simply contemplating nature's wonders can evoke awe and enhance well-being.

Nature-Based Interventions

Despite the abundance of research demonstrating the beneficial effects of nature on our cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being, nature-based interventions remain understudied and underutilized as a mental health strategy. Surprisingly, it's not difficult to motivate individuals to engage in these interventions, nor to maintain their participation. Despite early evidence, such as studies by Passmore[25], indicating that nature-based interventions may be more effective than other positive psychology interventions for enhancing well-being, few therapists incorporate them into their practice. Moreover, research suggests that even a single nature walk can significantly alleviate anxiety. There is a growing emphasis on nature-based interventions for children, with initiatives such as free programs to encourage kids to explore national parks gaining momentum in schools and communities.

For those intrigued by nature-based interventions, consider participating in the 30x30 Nature Challenge[26], by David Suzuki. This initiative invites individuals to dedicate 30 minutes daily to immersing themselves in nature for a continuous span of 30 days.

Determining the optimal amount of nature exposure for well-being benefits remains relatively unexplored, with limited studies addressing this question. However, one study by Mathew White and colleagues (2019)[27] discovered that individuals who had dedicated a minimum of two recreational hours to nature activities in the previous week reported heightened levels of health and well-being. Beyond mere time spent, the crucial factor lies in the emotional connection with nature. This connection surpasses the benefits of social connectedness and could particularly resonate with introverts as a valuable means of enhancing well-being.

When you want to feel some awe about the world again, take a look at this collection by TED[28] of awe-inspiring things in the world around you.

Definitions

Biophilia

our intrinsic human tendency to seek connections with nature and other living beings

Attention Restoration Theory (ART)

suggests that individuals experience improved concentration following exposure to natural settings or even visual imagery of nature

Attribution

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Discovering Your Strengths

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4.1: Discovering Your Strengths

> **◑ Learning Objectives**
>
> Upon reading this chapter, the reader should be able to:
>
> - Define the term "strength" in the context of positive psychology.
> - Assess the purpose and utility of strengths assessments like Gallup StrengthsFinder Assessment for personal and professional development.
> - Figure out ways to use your strengths in everyday situations to make life better.

Start out this chapter by watching this general video on YouTube by Elvira Marie Chang on What is Gallup StrengthsFinder?[1]

> **❀ READ List**
>
> Next, explore an insightful article about the CliftonStrengths Finder, authored by Jeremy Sutton, Ph.D., available on PositivePsychology.com entitled Understanding the CliftonStrengths Assessment: A Guide[2].
>
> Afterward, read Chapter 10 of 'Positive Psychology: The Basics'[3] by Rona Hart. This chapter offers a comprehensive overview of Character Strengths and Virtues, providing valuable insights into this fundamental aspect of positive psychology.
>
> Check out this insightful review by Ghielen and colleagues titled "Promoting Positive Outcomes Through Strengths Interventions: A Literature Review"[4] for a review of the benefits associated with strengths interventions.

Celebrating our Unique Strengths

Each of us possesses unique strengths that define who we are. There is no need for engaging in negative upwards comparisons that reduce our self-worth.

Consider how much research has been conducted to understand and celebrate our positive traits, rather than just pinpointing what needs improvement. By shifting our focus to what is already great about ourselves, we can channel efforts into building on those strengths.

But what exactly are these strengths? A strength can fall under several categories, from physical abilities to mental resilience and moral integrity. Strength can be found in the resilience of our bodies, the agility of our minds, and our character. By recognizing these diverse strengths, we can empower ourselves to thrive in our unique ways.

Uncovering your strengths often begins with taking a strengths test or assessment. These assessments serve multiple purposes. As you progress in your career, you'll inevitably encounter interviews where discussing your strengths and weaknesses is common. It's a common human trait to overlook our strengths while dwelling on our weaknesses. However, knowing and embracing our strengths not only boosts our overall well-being but also guides us toward personal improvement and fulfillment.

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Of course, identifying your strengths is just the start - what truly matters is putting them into action regularly and finding new ways to leverage them.

If you are interested in completing a strengths finder assessment, here are some resources:

- Gallup: CliftonStrengths[5]

Attribution

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5: Living with Purpose: Exploring Eudaimonia, Meaning, and Flow

5.1: Introduction to Eudaimonia
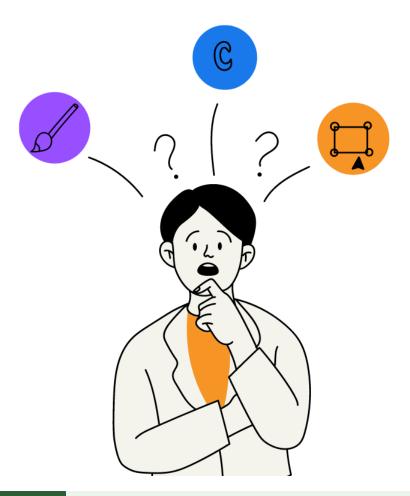
> ### 🧠 Learning Objectives
>
> Upon reading this chapter, the reader should be able to:
>
> - Define eudaimonia and its importance in psychology, including its components and key researchers.
> - Explore the relationship between meaning in life and well-being outcomes, and apply techniques for enhancing personal meaning.
> - Understand the concept of flow, its characteristics, conditions for experiencing it, and its impact on overall well-being.

What is Happiness?

In an earlier chapter, we touched on the concept of hedonia, which centers on the pursuit of pleasure. However, Aristotle challenged the notion that pleasure alone leads to a fulfilling life. He proposed the concept of **eudaimonia**, which encompasses self-discovery, realizing one's fullest potential, finding purpose and meaning, engaging deeply in activities, investing significant effort, and experiencing personal expression and profound connections in life. Interestingly, research shows a strong correlation between measures of hedonism and eudaimonia, with an average correlation coefficient of 0.8. Reflecting on this correlation offers valuable insights for future research and interventions in positive psychology.

> ### 🎲 READ List
>
> To read more about this issue, read Todd Kashdan's critique of Aristotle's Eudaimonic theory and his exploration of the various types of happiness in "How Many Types of Happiness Exist?[1]"

Some well-known eudaimonic researchers include Carol Ryff, Ed Deiner, Martin Seligman.

Carol Ryff developed the Psychological Well-Being Scale, which assesses six dimensions of well-being: purpose, mastery, self-acceptance, autonomy, personal growth, and positive relationships—all integral to eudaimonia. To learn more about this scale, visit Stanford University's dedicated page on the Well-being Scale[2]. You can also complete the questionnaire at this link[3].

We also touched upon Martin Seligman's PERMA model in an earlier chapter, which remains relevant here. To recap, PERMA represents **P**leasure, **E**ngagement (e.g., flow), **R**elationships, **M**eaning, and **A**chievement. You can explore the PERMA questionnaire on the University of Pennsylvania's Authentic Happiness website[4] and find more information about the measure and scoring in the PERMA Profiler, authored by Julie Butler and Margaret L. Kern.

Significance of Eudaimonia

Ed Diener, a leading researcher in the field of happiness, emphasized the significance of eudaimonic well-being, suggesting that it plays a crucial role in sustaining long-term subjective well-being. In essence, continuous pursuit of pleasure alone is insufficient for lasting happiness. Diener argued that individuals require additional factors such as long-term goals, purpose and meaning, meaningful relationships, and experiences of mastery and flow to achieve overall well-being.

Life satisfaction captures how individuals perceive their past, present, and future circumstances, focusing more on cognitive aspects than emotions. It reflects overall contentment with various life domains, including relationships, achievements, and coping abilities. Notably, cultural and individual values heavily influence how satisfaction is gauged. For instance, in collectivist societies, meeting societal expectations may impact satisfaction, while in individualistic cultures, personal esteem plays a more significant role.

Although hedonia and eudaimonia are not so separate as some would have us believe, it is useful to consider eudaimonia as valuable because it can create long-term and repeated happiness for humans. These are things we need to be happy and to make others happy.

We measure and manipulate eudaimonic constructs through various methods and interventions. For example, eudaimonia is typically measured through self-report measures that are reasonably valid. However, altering eudaimonia, like improving one's sense of purpose or relationships, might not be as simple as with hedonia. This prompts consideration of how daily measures of hedonic experiences, including positive and negative emotions, might be affected by changes in eudaimonic well-being.

> ✏ Definition: Eudaimonia
>
> theory that encompasses self-discovery, realizing one's fullest potential, finding purpose and meaning, engaging deeply in activities, investing significant effort, and experiencing personal expression and profound connections in life

Attribution

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5.2: Meaning and Purpose

Simple Moments Can Shape a Life of Significance

When discussing individuals who live profoundly meaningful lives, we often highlight those who achieve extraordinary feats or have a significant impact on society, like Harriet Tubman, Malala Yousafzai, or Greta Thunberg. We rarely spotlight ordinary people in this regard. Additionally, our attention tends to focus on notable achievements or remarkable contributions, and the underlying factors that shape their meaningful existence. However, it's surprising to note that many of us lead lives filled with profound significance. While we typically view meaning in life as an exceptional accomplishment, research suggests that finding meaning is a common human experience, often found in everyday aspects like relationships, positive emotions, and routine tasks.

Life meaning and other eudaimonic traits don't need to be overly complicated. This gives us hope that we can adjust life meaning, purpose, and related deep constructs in relatively simple ways. Moreover, happiness, closely correlated with eudaimonia, can also be influenced accordingly.

> ### 📌 What is your purpose in life?
>
> Watch as individuals share their profound insights on the question: "What is your purpose in life?"[5] in a thought-provoking video uploaded by Participant.
>
>

Firstly, a meaningful life is defined by a sense of purpose, providing a guiding force that gives direction and significance to one's existence (e.g., Baumeister, 1991[6]). Secondly, it involves feeling that one's actions and contributions matter, carrying weight and impact (e.g., Baumeister, 1991[7]). Lastly, there's a cognitive aspect: a meaningful life is one that makes sense to the individual, characterized by coherence, predictability, and meaningful connections (e.g., Antonovsky, 1993[8]; Baumeister, 1991[9]; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002[10]). While definitions of meaning in life often include these aspects, they may vary in emphasis.
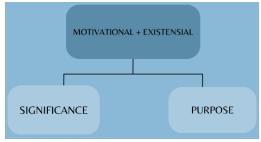

Figure 5.2.1: Motivational plus Existensial parse into Significance or Purpose
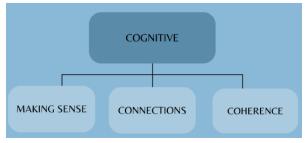

Figure 5.2.1: Cognitive Flow parse into 3 areas; Motivation, Connections or Coherence

Furthermore, those who find meaning in their lives tend to report higher levels of happiness, greater satisfaction with life, increased involvement in their work, improved immune function, and a greater ability to cope with stress, leading to a longer lifespan (Steger, 2009[11]). Additionally, they experience slower cognitive decline, lower rates of depression and suicidal thoughts, and are generally perceived as more socially appealing to others.

Let's work on enhancing your meaning in life and/or help you find some purpose in a meaningful way.

Activity: The Best Possible Future Self Exercise

Step 1.

The Best Possible Future Self Exercise, by Dr Laura King. This has been shown to improve overall happiness and reduce goal conflict, plus a host of other benefits too. So firstly, for 5 minutes, without any self-editing at all, without limitation and with inhibition write a response to this prompt:

> *"Think about your life in the future you are 109 years old. Imagine that everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all your life goals. Think of this as the realization of all your life dreams. Now, write about what you imagined"*

Step 2.

Please take a moment to jot down your response to this prompt for the next 5 minutes. Let your thoughts flow freely without holding back, without self-editing, criticism, or limitations.

> *"Imagine that your 109-year old self had access to a time machine. They jumped into that time machine and arrived to this very moment in time. They climb out, sit next to you and give you advice. What would they say?"*

Step 3.

Now take 2 minutes to take that advice and create a list of actions points from it. Simply focus on the top three action points every day.

Why does this work?

- As you pay attention to these elements, you'll begin to recognize what gives your life meaning. What's crucial is that you've outlined steps for today, ensuring that meaning isn't just a distant goal but something achievable in the present.
- **Note**: Finding purpose is a journey that unfolds over time, but these steps provide a path forward, steering you away from the feeling of "There has to be more to life than THIS."

How Engaged Are You?

Want to know your current level of life purpose? Take the Life Engagement Test (LET)[12], created by Dr. Michael Scheier and colleagues.

Finding Meaning in Adversity

Viennese psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl observed that fellow prisoners who maintained a sense of purpose demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of torture, forced labor, and starvation. Frankl's 1959 book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, solidified his beliefs regarding the paramount importance of meaning and purpose. A decade later, Frankl contributed to the creation of the first and most widely utilized standardized purpose assessment, the 21-item "Purpose in Life" test.

In a YouTube video uploaded by Callid Keefe-Perry, Victor Frankl is interviewed on the concept of Finding Meaning in Despair[13].

Meaning-making (MM), as explored by Nansook Park, proves invaluable for stress reduction and recovery. It helps individuals navigate through stressful situations, shaping their fundamental beliefs, goals, and emotions. This process can occur both automatically, through intrusive thoughts, and deliberately, via coping strategies like positive reappraisal, goal adjustment, problem-solving, or seeking solace in religion or spirituality.

Moreover, MM aids individuals in making sense of events that challenge their existing worldview. The outcomes of this meaning-making process are numerous and positive, including personal growth, the abandonment of unattainable goals in favor of new ones, a deeper understanding of events, and the restoration of life's meaning. For further insights, explore Dr. Nansook Park's[14] research at the University of Michigan.

📌 **LISTEN List**

Happiness 2.0- Cultivating your purpose[15] on Hidden Brain, featuring psychologist Dr. Anthony Burrow.

❓ **Guiding Questions**

1. What is languishing?
2. What is the difference between meaning and purpose?
3. What is the relation between stress and purpose? How does purpose change responses to stress and day to day life?
4. What are some examples of things purpose is related to? What types of benefits do you see in health, cognition, and relationships?
5. How do you find, cultivate, or develop purpose?

🔗 **READ List**

Be sure to check out Chapter 9, "Meaning in Life," in Dr. Rona Hart's book, *Positive Psychology: The Basics*[16].

❓ **Guiding Questions**

1. What is meaning in life?
2. What are its 3 components?
3. How do we measure life meaning?
4. What is the connection between self-actualization and meaning?
5. What are the benefits of meaning in life? What does it predict and what is it associated with in psychology? (*for the reading & the below video)

📌 **WATCH List**

Check out the video titled *Your Life Is Pretty Meaningful*[17] by Dr. Laura King, presented at the 2014 Society for Personality & Social Psychology conference.

❓ **Guiding Questions**

1. What are the myths of meaning in life described in this video?
2. What does Dr. King mean when she says that people think Life Meaning is not ineffable?
3. What are some easy things that increase life meaning?

✏️ **Definition: Meaning-making (MM)**

interpreting experiences and assigning meaning to them based on personal beliefs and values

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> 📌 **WATCH List**
>
> Watch Youtuber, FlightMediocrity, discuss the work of flow expert and psychologist, Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in this animated book summary[18].
>
>

> ** ⚘ READ List**
>
> Then, read Chapter 8 of *Positive Psychology: The Basics*[19] by Rona Hart, which delves into the concept of flow.
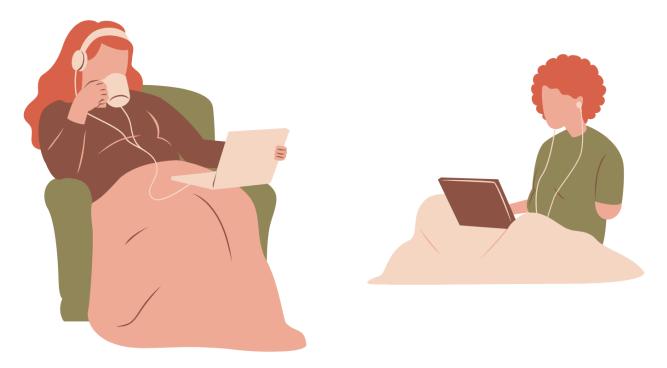>
> Explore further How to Measure Flow with Scales and Questionnaires[20], check out Dr. Heather S. Lonczak's article published on PositivePsychology.com.

Flow

From the perspective of flow, a fulfilling life entails being fully immersed in the present moment, much like mindfulness practices. In a world often preoccupied with the past and future, embracing the now is essential for experiencing true contentment.

Psychological **flow** embodies a state of deep absorption, focus, and involvement in activities, accompanied by a sense of enjoyment. It is characterized by complete absorption, distortion of time perception, effortless yet intense focus, and smooth transition between actions. While there's a sense of control, it's not absolute. However, it's important to note that flow can sometimes lead to neglecting basic needs like food, sleep, self-care, and the needs of others.

True or False? If you binge watch several hours of your favorite show, you are in flow.

Think about the things you do during free time –passively scrolling through Facebook or Twitter.

- Are these behaviors contributing to unhappiness? Why?
- What if we focused on the **here** and **now** instead?

In our fast-paced, future-oriented society, we find ourselves frequently shifting between dwelling on the past and fixating on the future. This perpetual state often leaves us disengaged, feeling bored, and lacking in attentiveness, contradicting the concept of flow.

Flow is an optimal experience characterized by being fully present in the moment, featuring elements of novelty, absorption, a sense of sacredness (whether spiritual or existential), and pursuit of meaningful goals. Think about the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City, for example. Michelangelo's commitment to his art was so intense that he would often go without food and sleep, enduring discomfort until he collapsed from exhaustion. His single-minded focus on his work led to neglect of basic self-care and relationships, sometimes going weeks without changing his clothes or boots.

The conditions for experiencing flow encompass two key factors. Firstly, there are perceived challenges or opportunities for action that match the individual's existing skills, neither underutilizing them nor overwhelming them. Secondly, clear proximal goals emerge during the flow state, accompanied by immediate feedback on progress.

Regions of Momentary Experiences:

- **Flow**: where challenges and skills matched
- **Boredom**: where challenges and opportunities are too easy relative to skills
- **Anxiety**: where demands increasingly exceed capacities for action

Characteristics of Flow

- Absorption in momentary experience
- Accompanies highly engaging activities
- Time passes by quickly
- Attention completely focused on task
- Sense of self is lost
- Sense of control
- Intrinsically rewarding

Initially, flow was assessed qualitatively through interviews. However, researchers now employ Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA) to measure it more objectively. This method involves paging or beeping participants at random intervals and prompting them to describe their ongoing activities, emotional states, and cognitive experiences. For instance, participants might be asked, "How much time are you in flow?" This approach allows for real-time data collection, offering a more accurate understanding of flow experiences in individuals' daily lives.

The Flow Questionnaire, developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1988)[21] was is designed to measure the subjective experience of flow. In the Flow questionnaire, respondents were presented with the three descriptions and asked whether they could recall similar experiences. They were then asked to describe these experiences and to rate associated feelings, e.g., level of involvement, effort, anxiety, etc. This methodology depends on respondents recognizing the flow descriptions and relating them to their own previous experiences.

> Gain a better understanding of the Flow Questionnaire, or complete it yourself with the Flow State Scale[22] developed by Dr. Susan Jackson and Dr. Herbert Marsh.

Flow can be quite difficult to generalize and manipulate in lab settings because there is so much variability in what predicts flow in a person. Solving math problems for one person is miserable and another can find great satisfaction and flow in it, for example. Cultural differences add another layer of complexity, as the conditions conducive to flow differ across societies. In Western cultures, individuals often experience flow when engaging in activities that push their boundaries, such as facing skilled opponents in games like chess. Conversely, in Hong Kong, students tend to prioritize a balance between their skills and the challenge level, adopting a more cautious approach. However, it's important to note that this preference doesn't apply universally, as evidenced by Japanese college students. Given that most studies on flow have been conducted in the United States and Western Europe, it's essential to consider the role of culture in understanding flow experiences. Surprisingly, research suggests that a significant proportion of individuals in the U.S. rarely or never experience flow, with only a minority reporting daily encounters with this optimal state of consciousness (Delle et al. 2017)[23].

Flow experiences are often associated with specific traits and characteristics. These include curiosity, persistence, low self-centeredness, and possessing an autotelic personality. An autotelic individual finds enjoyment in life itself and typically engages in activities for their intrinsic value rather than to achieve external goals. For them, the process is inherently rewarding, and they prioritize the journey over the destination. Additionally, those with an autotelic disposition tend to seek out high-action opportunities and exhibit higher levels of positive affect.

In clinical settings, harnessing the power of flow involves identifying and promoting activities and environments that facilitate optimal experiences. Therapists assist individuals in recognizing what triggers flow for them, encouraging them to invest their energy in such activities. This process involves helping clients pinpoint their passions and strengths to cultivate a sense of purpose and engagement. Additionally, therapists work on developing personal characteristics and skills that enhance the likelihood of flow experiences. By focusing on these elements, individuals can experience increased fulfillment and well-being in their daily lives.

9 Dimensions of Flow

Conditions

Challenge-Skill Balance

The balance between levels of perceived challenge and perceived skills is a central condition of a flow experience (Tse, Nakamura, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2021)[24]. When the perceived level of challenge is below a person's skill level, they are likely to feel bored and disengaged. When the perceived level of challenge is well above a person's level of skill, they are likely to feel anxious. The balance between the two, with challenges very slightly stretching a person's perceived skills, is most conducive to experiencing flow. Note that levels of challenge and skill, and their subsequent balance, are not

determined by objective criteria associated with an activity. Rather, both levels of challenge and skill are those perceived by the individual themselves.

Clear and Emergent Goals

The experience of flow occurs within a system of dynamic and open motivation. Clear goals in the context of flow experience refer to those that emerge in a person's awareness as their subjective experience unfolds (Tse, Nakamura, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2021)[25]. The immediate and momentary nature of emergent goals is in contrast to broader, more general goals that a person may have in mind while engaging in daily tasks. For example, a student may set a goal to finish a written assignment in a given amount of time. However, such goals do not represent clear and emergent goals in the case of flow. Rather, goals that emerge once a student begins writing their assignment such as selecting an idea to start their draft with, brainstorming about their response, drafting an outline, elaborating on specific points they wish to highlight in their response, reviewing their draft for logical consistencies, even just completing one sentence, and assessing whether it links logically with the next, are more representative of a flow experience. In other words, clear goals during flow emerge in the moment within a person's subjective awareness as opposed to being set before the activity even begins.

Immediate Feedback

Immediate and continuous feedback about how well one is doing helps sustain flow and can be thought of as an ongoing condition of a flow experience operating alongside clear and emergent goals (Tse, Nakamura, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2021)[26]. Similar to the balance between challenge and skill levels as well as clear emergent goals, feedback, as immediately received in the present moment, is subjectively perceived and assessed by the person themself. This is in contrast to external feedback that a person may receive later about their performance in an activity, such as that received from another person (e.g., a letter grade or score assigned to a student's assignment).

Characteristics

Focused Concentration

Completely focused concentration representative of deep absorption in the task at hand is a key characteristic of flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990[27]; Tse, Nakamura, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2021)[28]. However, unlike deliberate regulation

of attention to concentrate on a particular stimulus, focused concentration in the case of flow experience emerges as a function of the flow conditions being satisfied. Focused attention within flow experience is often reported as feeling effortless, in contrast to effortful focus that may characterize other experiences of focused attention (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2018)[29]. In other words, flow states are unlikely to occur simply because one has chosen to intentionally and effortfully concentrate. Instead, complete concentration is more often the product of a situation in which the perceived levels of challenge and skill are balanced and emergent goals and feedback are clear.

Merging of Action and Awareness

The merging of action and awareness within flow experience represents the subjective perception of feeling one with the activity. During flow, the distinction between the individual and the activity is not in the forefront of awareness. Many accounts of the flow state describe an experience in which one action flows into the next without pausing for conscious reflection (Csikszentmihalyi 1990)[30]. In other words, many people report that during flow, one action seamlessly follows the next without thinking beforehand about what to do next, because the action and the awareness of that action tend to merge into one unified experience.

Sense of Control

People often report feeling in control of their actions when experiencing flow. For example, a rock climber may report feeling in control of where to place their hand next as they climb up the face of a mountain. Although a flow experience is often accompanied by a sense of control, it is contextualized against the backdrop of feeling that control may be lost at any given moment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)[31]. In this sense, perceptions of control that emerge during flow experiences can be distinguished from feelings of complete control that may be more characteristic of relaxation or actions that have become automatic.

The sense of control that accompanies flow experiences exhibits a paradoxical nature (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990[32]; Logan, 1988[33]); many people report feeling completely in control, yet a true feeling of complete control is at odds with one's skills being stretched by an attainable challenge. To be completely in control would imply that one is not actually being challenged, or that one might not fall out of control at any given moment if concentration is not maintained. The allure of flow, however, is in the satisfaction of exercising control in normally difficult to control situations, or experiencing the possibility, rather than the actuality, of control (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)[34]. Importantly, like the balance of challenge and skills, the sense of control during flow is an individual's subjective perception of control rather than an objective assessment.

Time Distortion

As attention is fully focused on the task or activity at hand during flow, little to no spare attentional resources are available to keep track of the passage of time. As a result, people often report completely losing track of time during flow. Once the flow experience ends, the passage of time tends to feel different than normal and the perception of time having passed by very quickly or rather slowly during the flow experience is a common occurrence (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)[35].

Loss of Self-Consciousness

Attention is fully focused in the present moment during flow. Similar to losing track of time passing, spare attention is not available during flow experiences to consciously view oneself as a social actor engaged in a task or activity. Rather, a person simply acts without thinking self-consciously about themself or how others will perceive their actions. In other words, during flow, attention is fully focused on what one is doing rather than being invested in consciously monitoring oneself.

Note that the loss of self-consciousness does not mean the loss of consciousness altogether, as in the case of fainting, for instance. In addition, the loss of self-consciousness does not represent a complete lack of control and regulation of one's behavior. In fact, a person is fully conscious of their actions during flow, as in the case of rock climbing, but simply not conscious of oneself as a separate participant in one's subjective experience.

Autotelic Experience

Flow experience is autotelic in that it is pursued for its own sake. The term autotelic is derived from the Greek words auto (i.e., self) and telos (i.e., goal). In other words, experiences of flow are ends in themselves, rather than simply serving as a means to another end. Although flow is associated with beneficial outcomes such as positive mood and higher performance, such outcomes are not generally why people want to replicate flow once they experience it in a particular activity. Such benefits may best be seen as by-products of flow rather than the primary reason to pursue such an experience.

Furthermore, while one could begin a potential flow activity with an external goal in mind (e.g., rehearsing for a future performance, competition, or completing an assignment), the experience during flow makes the activity a worthwhile end in itself regardless of the final outcome. With that said, skill development is often associated with flow since the enjoyable

nature of flow itself motivates people to seek a similar quality of experience in the future. With each subsequent flow experience, skills tend to gradually improve, leading one to seek out greater challenges in order to maintain an optimal balance of challenge and skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990[36]; Tse, Nakamura, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2021[37]).

> **? Guiding Questions**
>
> 1. What is flow?
> 2. What happens to attention and sense of time during flow?
> 3. How do you put yourself in a state of flow?
> 4. What is the "area of apathy" and how does that connect to happiness, flow, and how you spend your time each day?

> **✎ Definition: Flow**
>
> embodies a state of deep absorption, focus, and involvement in activities, accompanied by a sense of enjoyment

Attribution

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6: Optimism, Hope, Efficacy and an Introduction to Good Relationships

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6.1: Hope and Optimism

> ### 🧠 Learning Objectives
>
> Upon reading this chapter, the reader should be able to:
>
> - Define optimism, hope, and learned optimism, and recognize the differences between them.
> - Explore optimistic illusions and biases, and understand their impact on decision-making processes.
> - Define hope and its significance in human well-being, including its connection to positive outcomes.
> - Differentiate between hope and mere wishing, and understand their respective roles in goal pursuit.
> - Learn practical strategies for utilizing hope to pursue goals and navigate obstacles effectively.

> ### ⚙️ READ List
>
> Start off this Chapter by reading Chapter 5 of *Positive Psychology: The Basics*[1] by Rona Hart, which discusses optimism and hope.

> ### 📌 WATCH List
>
> Watch Dr. Shane Lopez, a senior scientist at Gallup, discuss hope in this interview[2] uploaded onto YouTube by UMNCSH.
>
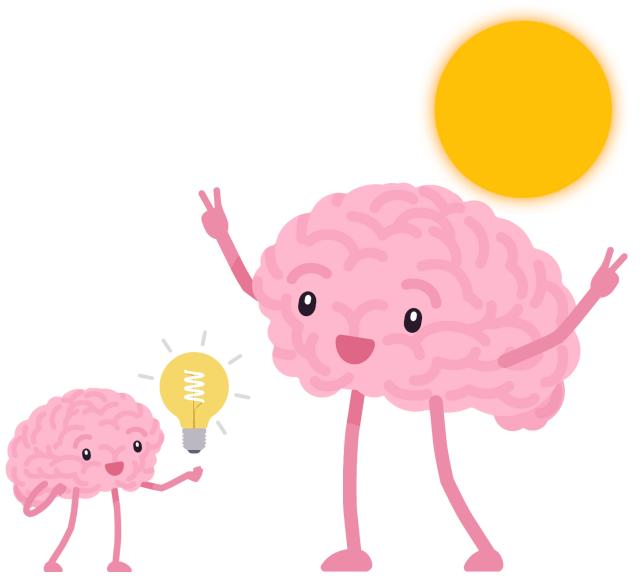> Next, watch FightMediocrity's YouTube video animation on Learned Optimism by Martin Seligman[3].
>
>

Self Assess

Utilize self-assessment tools to measure your levels of hope and optimism. Take the Learned Optimism test from the Authentic Happiness website[4] under 'Engagement Questionnaires' to assess learned optimism. Additionally, discover your trait optimism by completing the LOT-R[5]. Lastly, evaluate your hope levels using the Adult Hope Scale[6].

Perception Matters

Optimism prompts us to consider the benefits of looking on the bright side. **Optimism** means feeling hopeful about the future and believing good things will happen. It's seeing things positively (Oxford)[7]. The traditional understanding of optimism, as presented by Dr. Michael Scheier and Dr. Chuck Carver, describes it as a consistent tendency to anticipate positive outcomes over negative ones. When you have a goal in mind, your expectations about achieving it can either be positive or negative. These expectations are shaped by a combination of genetic factors and early life experiences, including positive interactions and secure attachments formed during childhood.

Researchers, led by Dr. Michael Scheier, examined the impact of optimism on patients, particularly in terms of rehospitalization. Their study involved 309 patients who had undergone bypass surgery, primarily men in their 60s. The findings revealed that optimism served as a predictor for both surgery and rehospitalization related to coronary heart disease (CHD). Additionally, optimism showed significance in relation to depression and neuroticism. When considering all personality factors together and adjusting for sex and cholesterol, optimism emerged as the sole predictor (Scheier et al., 1999)[8]. The study's findings prompted researchers to explore the underlying mechanisms by which optimism contributes to quicker post-surgery recovery in individuals. It seems that believing in the effectiveness of medications and following doctor's advice increases commitment to treatment, boosting chances of recovery. Conversely, doubting treatment efficacy may reduce motivation to adhere to prescribed regimens. Optimists handle stress better, embracing growth and effective coping strategies, leading to resilience in overcoming challenges. They also tend to pursue higher education and excel in their careers.

Dr. Suzanne Segerstrom's research on immunology highlights a concerning trend on optimism. She conducted a study among law students facing the challenges of their demanding coursework. Interestingly, those with remarkably high levels of optimism demonstrate poorer immune system function during exam periods compared to their less optimistic peers. This unexpected finding is attributed to the heightened stress and role conflict experienced by highly optimistic students. Segerstrom suggests that while optimism can typically be advantageous, excessive optimism may have adverse effects, leading to disappointment when hopeful expectations aren't realized and ignoring the reality of future events (Segerstrom, 2001)[9].

Transitioning from optimism to hope, hope shares similarities with optimism because both involve expecting good things to happen or believing that goals can be reached (Oxford)[10]. Defined by Dr. Charles R. Snyder as goal-directed thinking, hope involves

pathways thinking, which includes the perceived capacity to identify routes toward desired goals, and **agency thinking**, involving the motivation to utilize these pathways. Importantly, for hope to be applicable, the goal must hold personal value, regardless of its duration or difficulty. The emotion of hope serves as a guiding beacon, reassuring individuals that they are progressing towards their aspirations.

It's not just about positive thinking; action is essential too. According to Snyder's model, hope involves two key components: pathways thinking and agency thinking. Pathways thinking refers to the ability to identify effective strategies to pursue goals, while agency thinking involves the motivation to use these strategies and persevere in the face of obstacles. In Snyder's view, hope is more than just an emotion; it's a dynamic interaction between these cognitive processes. Emotions serve as indicators of progress toward achieving goals rather than being the primary focus. Snyder also developed measures of hope for both adults and children, as well as a state measure to assess changes in hope over time. This model has been extensively researched worldwide and is distinct from related concepts such as optimism and self-efficacy (Snyder, 2002)[11].
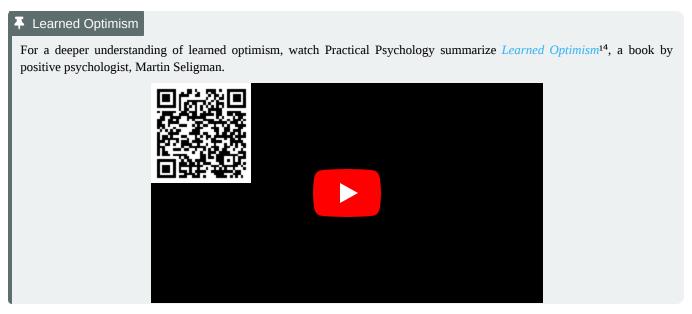

How hopeful are you? Discover your level of hopefulness by completing The Trait Hope Scale[12].

Hope provides various benefits, including improved problem-solving abilities, positive self-talk during challenges, increased positive emotions and energy, and a mindset that sees obstacles as conquerable challenges. It is cultivated through learning, strong parental attachment, and the interplay of dopamine-regulated **behavioral inhibition system (BIS)/ behavioral activation system (BAS)**. Benefits of hope include better GPA, increased athletic performance, increased happiness, and social ability (Rand et al., 2020)[13].

Exploring Learned Optimism

Shifting from the traditional understanding of optimism, let's explore alternative forms such as **learned optimism**. Recall the theory of **learned helplessness** from introductory psychology, which was developed by Seligman as a counter model to the animal model of depression, based on the observation of dogs that no longer attempted to escape shock. This theory prompts an exploration into how individuals make attributions, or explanations, for both positive and negative events in their lives. This inquiry leads to the concept of explanatory style, which examines the habitual manner in which individuals interpret and explain the occurrences they encounter.

> 📌 Learned Optimism
>
> For a deeper understanding of learned optimism, watch Practical Psychology summarize *Learned Optimism*[14], a book by positive psychologist, Martin Seligman.
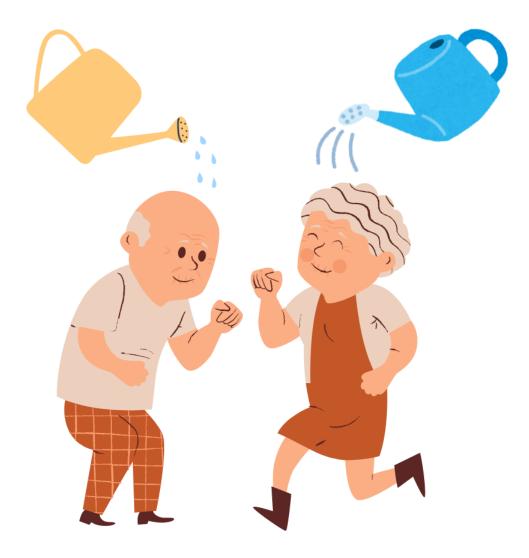>
>

Individuals with high levels of learned optimism tend to respond to negative events in specific ways. For instance, when encountering setbacks like failing a midterm, they are more inclined to make external attributions, such as blaming the professor or acknowledging external factors like a busy schedule impacting their preparation, rather than internalizing the failure. They also tend to view the setback as variable, assuming that the next exam will likely be better, rather than stable, seeing the failure as a permanent aspect of their abilities. Furthermore, they may attribute the failure to specific circumstances, like the unique challenges of a particular class, rather than seeing it as a global reflection of their competence. In contrast, individuals with a pessimistic outlook are more likely to attribute failures internally, seeing themselves as inherently flawed or incapable. They also tend to view failures as stable traits, expecting similar outcomes in the future, and perceive them as global, affecting multiple aspects of their lives beyond just the immediate situation.

The origins of an optimistic explanatory style can be traced to various factors. Firstly, research suggests a genetic component, as evidenced by twin studies[15] indicating a hereditary influence on optimism levels. Additionally, a secure attachment to parents during childhood has been linked to the development of an optimistic outlook later in life. This connection is further reinforced by the theory that parental optimistic explanatory styles, where positive outcomes are emphasized, tend to shape similar attitudes in their children. Conversely, exposure to pessimistic narratives, such as those commonly portrayed in television programs, can instill a sense of helplessness and pessimism, leading to a lower learned optimism in individuals.

It's important to recognize that it's not only one's actual skill but rather their belief in their skill that significantly impacts outcomes. This concept is rooted in **perceived control**, which refers to the belief that one has the ability to make a difference in the course or the consequences of some event or experience; often helpful in dealing with stressors. By fostering a sense of perceived control, individuals can approach difficulties with greater confidence and resilience, ultimately shaping their responses and outcomes.

In their work in 1977, Dr. Ellen J. Langer and Dr. Judith Rodin investigated the effects of reintroducing control to residents in nursing homes who had experienced learned helplessness. By empowering them to make choices and be mindful of their newfound control—such as selecting movies or caring for a plant—they observed remarkable improvements. Residents showed higher health and activity levels, better mood and sociability, and notably lower mortality rates over an 18-month period (Langer & Rodin, 1977)[16].

Definitions

Optimism
feeling hopeful about the future and believing good things will happen

Pathways Thinking
Includes the perceived capacity to identify routes toward desired goals

Agency Thinking
involving the motivation to pursue goals

The Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS)
associated with responses to fear and punishment avoidance

Behavioral Activation System (BAS)
linked to responses to rewards and approach behavior

Learned Optimism

how individuals make attributions, or explanations, for both positive and negative events in their lives

Learned Helplessness

belief that one is powerless to do anything about a situation after repeated experiences of adversity

Perceived Control

the belief that one has the ability to make a difference in the course or the consequences of some event or experience

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6.2: Self-Efficacy

Believing in Yourself

Self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to succeed, is influenced by past experiences, observational learning, visualization, social persuasion, and emotional state. These factors collectively shape confidence and capability in facing challenges. In the world of control, there's a fundamental belief captured in "I think I can, I think I can." This sentiment reflects an individual's confidence in their ability to influence outcomes through personal action, a concept outlined by Albert Bandura[17], a behavioral psychologist. It comprises two critical components: **Outcome Expectancy (OE)**, evaluating the task, and **Efficacy Expectancy (EE)**, assessing one's capability to achieve it. Notably, EE carries more weight, representing belief in personal abilities over external factors.

Most studies in this field are conducted in North America, using scales tailored to its culture. American values prioritize future mastery, goal-oriented activities, and individualism. However, within the U.S., individuals from Cuban, Mexican, and Puerto Rican backgrounds tend to focus more on the present. Eastern cultures view suffering differently, not always negatively. For instance, Asian Americans may exhibit higher pessimism, but it's linked to better problem-solving, unlike most US data on caucasians (Chang, 1996)[18]. This suggests that optimism doesn't benefit everyone equally. Hence, it's vital not to assume universal correlations.

1. Identify someone who possesses a trait you admire. Observe their behavior and actions related to that trait, and emulate them when appropriate. Don't hesitate to ask them for advice on how they developed that characteristic.

2. Set specific goals (HOPE). Break down larger aspirations into manageable steps. For instance, if your goal is to achieve a 4.0 average this semester, outline the actions needed to reach it. Anticipate potential obstacles and plan strategies to overcome them.

3. Focus on pursuing smaller goals one step at a time. Concentrate on completing each task before moving on to the next, maintaining steady progress towards your ultimate objective.

4. When faced with setbacks or challenges, adopt an optimistic explanatory style. Rather than dwelling on negative outcomes, seek positive explanations and constructive lessons from the experience. Whether it's a disappointing grade or a lost video game, approach setbacks with optimism and resilience.

Fostering optimism about your future goals can fuel your motivation and increase the likelihood of success. Research by Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006)[19] found that visualizing your best possible self boosts immediate positive emotions, with continued practice leading to sustained happiness even a month later. Stronger self-efficacy links to lower anxiety and depression, higher pain tolerance, improved academics, more political engagement, successful smoking cessation, and positive behavior changes like exercise and diet adherence, including aiding eating disorder recovery. Additionally, it's beneficial in enhancing psychotherapy effectiveness.

Even the perception of control, whether real or fake, can influence your health. In an experiment where participants were exposed to a stressful noise, those who were given a fake control option, such as a non-functioning button to mitigate the noise, showed improved health outcomes compared to those with no control option at all. This suggests that the mere belief in control, even if it's illusory, can positively impact health by reducing the stress response and bolstering immune function. Therefore, having a sense of control, even if it's not genuine, can still be beneficial for your well-being (Sieber et al., 1992)[21].

Definitions

Self-efficacy
   the belief in one's ability to succeed
Outcome Expectancy (OE)
   evaluating what needs to be done
Efficacy Expectancy (EE)
   evaluating your capability to do something

Attribution

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6.3: Relationships and Well-Being

Loneliness and Isolation

As a society, we are witnessing a concerning trend of increasing loneliness and isolation. Individuals are spending more time apart from one another and experiencing heightened feelings of loneliness. This shift is accompanied by a decline in social capital, characterized by weakened connections with others and a deterioration of trust and reciprocity (Lim et al., 2020)[22]. Social connection matters greatly because it is a key predictor of well-being. Quality relationships, whether with close friends, family, or weaker ties, are fundamental to both eudaimonic and hedonic well-being. Interacting with others generally leads to happiness, energy, and overall positive feelings, making it a crucial aspect of our lives.

While many believe that happiness is hard to define or relies on wealth, researchers have identified core factors essential for a happy life. These include the number of friends, the closeness of relationships with friends and family, and connections with coworkers and neighbors (Murray et al., 1996)[23].

From an evolutionary standpoint, communal living has offered crucial advantages for survival, providing protection against threats and enhancing success in activities like hunting. Additionally, collective child-rearing strategies have ensured the offspring's well-being and success within the group. Even studies such as Dr. Harry Harlow's[24] with monkeys have shown a preference for affection over sustenance, highlighting the innate need for social bonds. Our biological makeup reinforces these tendencies, with oxytocin commonly known as the "cuddle hormone," emphasizing our natural inclination towards social connection and love. When we perceive social support, we tend to respond better to stress, a phenomenon known as stress buffering. The "Tend and Befriend" hypothesis[25], proposed by Shelley Taylor at UCLA, contrasts the traditional "Fight or Flight" response by suggesting that humans, particularly females, have evolved a tendency to seek out their social group and provide care for others during stress. This hypothesis highlights the importance of social connection in our survival as a species. The hormone oxytocin is believed to play a role in facilitating this behavior.

Quality of relationships certainly plays a significant role, yet even without considering it, the quantity of regular social contacts can predict lifespan. This comparison between social isolation and integration underscores the importance of social connections in determining longevity. You can read more about these findings by Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad and colleagues in *Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review*[26].

Researchers also investigated whether extraverted individuals were more likely to have outstanding relationships, but our findings suggest otherwise. Extraversion wasn't correlated with higher or lower relationship ratings; introverts are just as capable of fostering exceptional relationships as extraverts. Since it's these exceptional relationships that contribute to our happiness, this indicates that introverts can also find fulfillment through them. In conclusion, our analysis indicates that being more prosocial—engaging in meaningful, genuine relationships, demonstrating kindness and generosity, and being part of a supportive community—is the most promising path to sustainably enhancing our well-being. Research by GGSC fellow Brett Ford[27] supports this perspective, suggesting that prioritizing this approach to happiness may be more effective than solely pursuing continuous pleasure, success, and power.
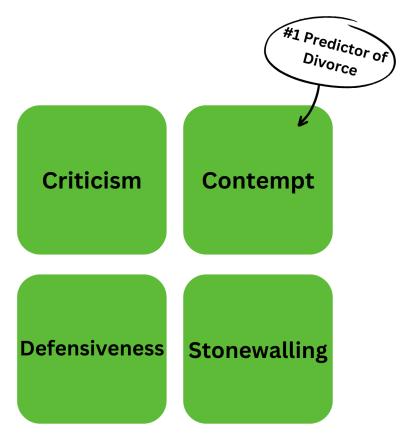
But…Do we even know how to connect anymore?

Quality connections are vital because they form the foundation of relationships. Positive micro interactions, repeated over time, build trust, openness, and belonging. These connections benefit individuals by reducing stress and enhancing well-being. At a group level, they foster collaboration, shared identity, and resilience. Ultimately, they are essential for personal fulfillment and collective success.

What the research says about making quality connections (Stephen et al., 2012)[28]:

1. Greet with respect (physically open gestures, convey positive expectations, openness).
2. Convey interest and care (ask meaningful questions that display genuine interest/curiosity/concern in and for the other person).
3. Listen well (body language, follow up questions).
4. Show appreciation and kindness (thank the other person when appropriate).
5. Demonstrate responsiveness (e.g., react to the person, repeat back what they said, offer a helpful reaction).
6. Identify shared interests/common ground.
7. Disclose vulnerability (open up about struggles, concerns).
8. Express affirmation (look for chances to offer confirmation/attention/approval).
9. Generate laughter (jokes, laughing, banter).

Positive interactions are crucial for sustaining long-term relationships, as emphasized by Dr. John Gottman[29], who also warns about the damaging impact of the 'four horsemen' on relationships.

#1 Predictor of Divorce

Criticism

Contempt
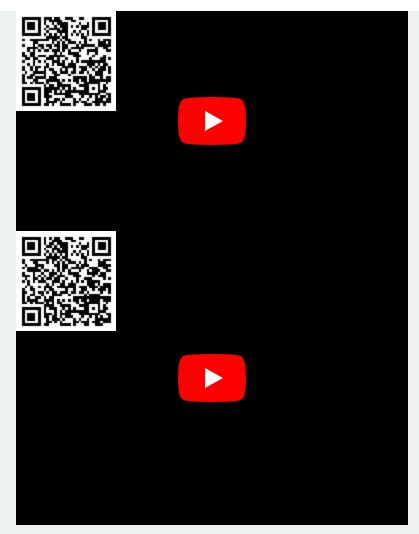
Defensiveness

Stonewalling

Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling are behaviors that can deeply harm relationships if not addressed. Criticism involves attacking someone's character or actions, while Contempt manifests as belittling or adopting a stance of superiority. Defensiveness, a natural response to criticism, often involves reverse-blaming or an unwillingness to acknowledge one's faults, hindering resolution. Stonewalling is emotional shutdown and physical withdrawal, creating a barrier to connection and resolution. To strengthen relationships, therapy or marriage counseling can provide vital support. John Gottman's research challenges common assumptions about divorce predictors. Instead of fights or anger, successful marriages navigate conflict constructively, avoiding avoidance as a long-term strategy. Traits like whining, defensiveness, and stubbornness during arguments can signal trouble down the road. Gottman's "5:1 ratio" emphasizes the importance of maintaining five positive interactions for every negative one to sustain relationship well-being.[29]

📌 **What about negative responses– Should we have none?**

It's not about completely eliminating negativity but rather about maintaining a healthy ratio between positive and negative interactions, a principle emphasized by John Gottman. For a deeper understanding, watch the Gottman Institutes video upload called, *Invest in Your Relationship: The Emotional Bank Account*[30] and *How Much Negativity Can Your Relationship Stand?*[31]

> While it's widely acknowledged that our partners and friends often offer support during tough times, the importance of their response to our successes is equally significant. This aspect is crucial for relationship well-being, as it communicates care and love, demonstrating genuine interest in the individual and their accomplishments.

Capitalizing in Social Relationships

To cultivate positive social bonds over time, it's crucial to respond appropriately to relationship bids. Active-constructive responses, exemplified by attentiveness and enthusiasm, are key when receiving good news from friends or partners, such as an award, a new job, or a raise.

For instance:

- Active-constructive: "That's GREAT!" (enthusiastic response)
- Active-destructive: "Do you have more to do now?" (focuses on the downside)
- Passive-constructive: "That's nice" [looks back at phone] (muted acknowledgment)
- Passive-destructive: "Did you watch the Super Bowl this weekend?" (disinterested and unengaged)

While it's not necessary to provide an active-constructive response every time, it should be the predominant type of response, ideally in a 3:1 ratio (Gable et al., 2006)[32].

Dr. Shelly Gable[33] from UCSB sheds light on building love in relationships by discussing the significance of responding well to positive events. For further insights on improving interactions, consider watching Responding Well to Others: How our response to someone's good news affects their happiness[34] by LeadershipLifestyles on YouTube. Additionally, keeping your ratios in mind is essential. Consider the balance between positivity and negativity, listening and distraction, as well as talking about yourself versus

actively listening in your interactions with others. These elements play a crucial role in fostering meaningful connections and enhancing relationship dynamics.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: Prosocial Behavior and Acts of Kindness

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7.1: Psychological Flourishing with Prosocial Behavior

> **◐ Learning Objectives**
>
> Upon reading this chapter, the reader should be able to:
>
> - Define prosocial behavior, explore its underlying motivations, and analyze its benefits for individual well-being.
> - Implement actionable strategies to integrate more kindness into daily life for enhanced personal fulfillment and societal well-being.
> - Understand how acts of kindness are influenced by psychological mechanisms like priming, and their effects on mood and perception.
> - Analyze the benefits of giving social support over receiving it, based on empirical studies.

Interacting with Kindness

Explore Dr. Katherine Nelson and colleagues' paper titled *Do unto others or treat yourself? The effects of prosocial and self-focused behaviors on psychological flourishing*[1], as they discuss the significance of doing nice things for others.

Research highlights the significance of social contact for well-being. From hugs reducing stress to even brief interactions with strangers boosting happiness, the benefits are undeniable. Maintaining a wide network of "weak ties" can also offer valuable connections, advice, and inspiration, enhancing our overall happiness, and fulfillment (Van Lange et al., 2021)[2].

The widely held societal belief that treating ourselves leads to happiness may not always produce the desired outcomes. In a survey of 632 Americans, their monthly spending on bills, personal gifts, and charity was analyzed. A link was found between higher happiness and spending on others, regardless of income. On a university campus, students given money to spend on themselves or others showed that those who spent on others ended the day happier. Students who were asked to predict what would happen got it completely wrong (Dunn, Aknin & Norton, 2008)[3]. Another set of studies found that spending money on others resulted in healthier blood pressure levels than those who spent money on themselves (Whillans et al., 2016)[4].

In longitudinal studies, participants are typically randomly assigned to engage in acts of kindness either for others, for themselves, or as part of a neutral control activity, such as tracking daily routines. Over a period of four weeks, participants carry out three acts of kindness per week according to their assigned condition.Research findings reveal that individuals who perform acts of kindness for others, as opposed to themselves or engaging in neutral activities, experience significant enhancements in positive emotions, mental well-being, and reductions in symptoms of anxiety and depression (Nelson et al., 2016[5]; Nelson-Coffey et al., 2021[6]). Moreover, a study showed that focusing on kindness towards others for four weeks led to notable improvements in immune-related

gene expression compared to self-directed kindness or neutral activities, suggesting a positive impact on physical health as well (Nelson-Coffey et al., 2017)[7].

Recall the last time you performed a good deed. Whether it was assisting someone with a flat tire, tidying up their apartment, aiding in studying for a challenging exam, surprising them with a thoughtful gift, mowing the lawn for an elderly relative, or offering a ride to an important destination despite it being out of your usual route. How did that experience make you feel?

Prosocial behaviors are actions intended towards helping others, driven by a sincere concern for their rights, emotions, and welfare. These behaviors encompass a range of actions, including showing empathy, providing assistance, sharing, comforting, and cooperating with others. Prosocial acts can be proactive, reactive, or altruistic, all of which yield beneficial outcomes for both individuals and communities. Proactive prosocial behaviors involve actions taken for self-benefit. Reactive behaviors respond to individual needs, while altruistic acts are aimed at helping others without expecting personal gain.

Participating in discussion groups and sharing knowledge generates social capital, which constitutes a form of prosocial behavior. Philanthropy, such as donating to charity or establishing charitable organizations, is also considered prosocial. Social capital is essentially the value derived from positive connections among individuals. Examples at the societal level include acts like holding the door for someone, returning lost items to strangers, offering directions, lending items, and any other mutually beneficial interactions between individuals, even if they are unfamiliar with each other. For instance, Wikipedia, as a collaboratively edited encyclopedia, exemplifies how contributions enhance both social and knowledge capital.

Researchers assessed participants' helping behavior through both observation and self-report measures. The observation involved evaluating if individuals stopped to help someone in need following experimental manipulations. Meanwhile, participants completed the Helping Attitude Scale, rating their attitudes towards helping others on a spectrum from skepticism to affirmation. You can access the scale through the provided link[8].

Societal Impacts of Pro-Social Behaviors

Engaging in prosocial behavior offers numerous benefits, including social support, stress reduction, and mood enhancement. Society would fall apart without it. Prosocial behavior fosters relationships and cultivates stable communities. Its significance amplifies during crises like the COVID pandemic, where its impact extends both to individuals and society at large. Amid financial struggles, isolation, and the grief of losing loved ones, aiding others becomes paramount, serving as a cornerstone for resilience and collective well-being (Haller et al., 2022)[9].

We engage in these actions not only for our own safety but also for the well-being of others. Consider the mask mandate during the Covid-19 pandemic. Each time you wore a mask or get vaccinated, you're not just safeguarding yourself; you are also practicing prosocial behavior by protecting those you come into contact with. These actions represent social contracts with our communities, demonstrating our commitment to keeping each other and our most vulnerable members healthy. According to Reddinger and colleagues (2022)[10], individuals who exhibit prosocial behaviors are more likely to get vaccinations. For instance, in a study

conducted between April and August 2021, participants who contributed the maximum amount ($4) to public welfare were 48% more likely to voluntarily obtain a first dose compared to those who made no contributions.

Prosocial behaviors, such as volunteering, not only benefit others but also have a positive impact on one's health and well-being. For instance, individuals who engage in high levels of volunteering (in two or more organizations) experienced a significant 63% decrease in mortality compared to nonvolunteers, even after adjusting for age and sex. Further analysis revealed that this reduced mortality risk was partially attributed to factors like improved physical functioning, healthier habits, and enhanced social support. Interestingly, volunteering showed even greater protective effects among individuals with high levels of religious involvement and perceived social support. Moreover, regardless of religious affiliation, any level of volunteering was associated with a substantial 60% reduction in mortality among those who attended religious services weekly. These findings underscore the multifaceted benefits of volunteering, which extend beyond individual health habits to encompass broader aspects of social engagement and community involvement (Oman et al., 1999)[11].

Volunteering offers numerous benefits for both physical and mental health. It requires active engagement, which is inherently beneficial. Research suggests that volunteering may even counteract age-related decline in brain function, particularly among older adults who engage in activities like youth mentoring through programs such as Experience Corps (Carlson et al., 2009)[12]. Teresa Seeman[13], a faculty member at UCLA specializing in public health, has extensively studied these effects. Beyond its physiological impacts, volunteering provides individuals with a profound sense of purpose and meaning in life. By fostering social connections and a sense of belonging, it also serves as a buffer against stress and depression. Engaging in volunteering activities often leads to downward social comparisons, which can positively influence self-esteem. Furthermore, volunteering may involve travel and exposure to new experiences, enhancing overall well-being through novelty and exploration.

Explore the research of Dr. Tara Gruenwald[14], Associate Professor and Chair of Psychology at Chapman University, who delves into the concept of generativity among older adults. One notable paper she co-authored with Dr. Teresa Seeman is titled: *Contributing to others, contributing to oneself: perceptions of generativity and health in later life*[15].

Can We Make You Prosocial?

Human behavior often inclines towards kindness and selflessness, possibly driven by evolutionary factors. Both **Kin Selection Theory** and **Reciprocal Altruism Theory** propose that our evolutionary success hinges on our ability to provide resources to others. Altruistic behavior offers numerous benefits, including reduced distress, enhanced health, and a heightened sense of meaning and purpose in life. Additionally, societal norms and upbringing play a significant role in fostering altruism. Socialization teaches us the importance of helping others, and there are often reciprocal benefits involved, such as receiving assistance from others in return.

Check out this study conducted by Dr. Alice Isen and Dr. Paula Levin, which examines the impact of positive affect on helpfulness in their paper titled, *Effect of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness*[16].

The "Glow of Goodwill"

Elevating individuals' moods increases the probability of them extending help to others. For instance, in the Isen & Levin Study[16], discovering a coin was associated with assisting someone in retrieving dropped papers, a trend observed across different demographics, including sexes, races, and ages.

> **? Guiding Questions**
>
> 1. What is prosocial behavior?
> 2. Describe the study design and goals.
> 3. What are the main study findings?
> 4. What is the difference between prosocial behavior vs. self-compassion?

Definitions

Prosocial behaviors

actions intended towards helping others, driven by a sincere concern for their rights, emotions, and welfare

Kin Selection Theory

organisms may act altruistically towards relatives to increase the chances of passing on shared genes

Reciprocal Altruism Theory

individuals help others in expectation of future help

Attribution

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7.2: The Science of Giving and Receiving Support

The Gift That Keeps on Giving

In this section, we will explore acts of kindness, the science behind giving and receiving support.

According to Dr. Michael Carlson and colleagues (1988)[17], there is a mechanism behind how this works. Priming involves the phenomenon where a positive mood influences perceptions, making everything appear more positive. This effect occurs because positive thoughts are more readily accessible, leading to a generally positive evaluation of one's surroundings. Furthermore, when individuals experience good fortune, they tend to focus their attention on their own advantages, which may lead to a desire to rectify perceived disadvantages in others. A positive mood also fosters a prosocial social outlook, prompting individuals to respond in ways that contribute to a more positive community and reinforce a positive view of human nature. Engaging in acts of kindness and generosity not only contributes to mood maintenance but also helps sustain a positive emotional state over time.

What is the Right Dose of Helping?

Research indicates that concentrating multiple acts of kindness into one day may be more effective than spreading them out over time. For instance, a study found that performing five acts of kindness in a single day led to greater increases in well-being compared to spreading them out over a week (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014[18]; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, et al., 2005[19]). Similarly, performing positive activities too frequently within a week might diminish their benefits, suggesting the importance of dosage and timing in positive activity interventions (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon et al., 2005)[19]. Acts of kindness and volunteering are powerful interventions that foster connections and meaning, potentially mitigating adaptation (Curry et al., 2018)[20].

Social Support: Giving is Better than Receiving

Social support involves feeling supported and having people available for both emotional and tangible assistance. In a five-year study of 1,500 married couples, researchers examined various aspects of social support, including giving emotional support to spouses and helping others with practical tasks. They also looked at receiving emotional support from spouses and having access to instrumental help from others. The study also considered general social contact with others. Helping others by offering practical assistance to friends, family, and neighbors, or providing emotional support to a spouse, was linked to lower mortality rates. However, receiving support didn't affect mortality once the impact of giving support was considered. The notion that individuals who are less healthy may be less capable of providing assistance to others and consequently may have shorter lifespans was considered. However, researchers addressed this concern by measuring and statistically adjusting for participants' health status at the beginning of the study, as well as their income, education level, and susceptibility to stress. One hypothesis suggests that providing support could cultivate a more positive outlook, which in turn may offer health advantages. Conversely, receiving support might sometimes have adverse effects on well-being, especially when it becomes overly noticeable (Brown et al., 2003)[21]. We can conclude that the most effective form of support to offer is support that goes unnoticed or is less visible.

How Can You Boost Your Own Helping Habits?

Start by **keeping a journal** of your acts of kindness, whether they're small gestures like offering a smile to someone who needs it, running errands for a neighbor, or simply holding a door open. Recognize that even seemingly minor actions contribute to a greater good. Make a habit of **lending a hand**, perhaps dedicating a day each week solely to acts of kindness. Research by Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky[22] at the University of California, Riverside, suggests that committing to five acts of kindness in a single day can have lasting benefits for weeks to come. **Visualize** yourself helping others, as studies by Mikulincer and Shaver[23] demonstrate that contemplating supportive figures in our lives can increase our willingness to assist those in need. **Draw on your unique talents when giving**, as it's easier to help when leveraging your strengths. Finally, **reflect on the ways others have supported you**, whether presently or in the past, and let that inspire your own acts of kindness.

Want to Feel More Prosocial? Loving-Kindness Meditation

Loving-Kindness Meditation is a traditional approach that is well-known for identifying successive stages of meditation during which one progressively cultivates loving-kindness towards themselves, a close friend, a "neutral" person, a difficult individual, all of these equally, and gradually, the entire universe. You can read more about this practice, and follow a step-by-step guide on the Loving-Kindness Meditation at Greater Good Action[24].

> ### ♺ READ List
>
> To deepen your understanding of self-compassion, read Dr. Kristin Neff's paper, *Self-Compassion: An Alternative Conceptualization of a Healthy Attitude Toward Oneself*[25].
>
> Afterwards, read a recent, brief news article[28] with an update on the money-happiness peak, written by Michele W. Berger and published on Penn Today, a business journal from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

> ### 📌 WATCH List
>
> If you're finding Dr. Kristin Neff's research valuable, explore further insights on self-compassion through her website, Self-Compassion[26].
>
> Watch a video uploaded by PopTech on YouTube of Dr. Elizabeth Dunn discussing happiness and money[27], specifically how people can effectively use their money to promote well-being.

? Guiding Questions

1. Define self-compassion
2. How is self-compassion different from self-esteem?
3. What are some examples of differences in self-compassion between groups of individuals?
4. At what level does money stop "buying" more happiness?
5. What does money have to do with savoring? How does money get in the way of happiness?
6. Understand how to spend money to maximize happiness
7. How was money spending related to job satisfaction and performance?
8. What is the updated finding discussed in this article and how does it relate to what was described in the Dunn video?
9. How does emotional well-being change trajectories of happiness-money connections?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

8: Culture and Applications of Positive Psychology

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8.1: Considering Culture

Defining Culture

How does the American Psychological Association define culture?

(n.) the distinctive customs, values, beliefs, knowledge, art, and language of a society or a community. These values and concepts are passed on from generation to generation, and they are the basis for everyday behaviors and practices.[1]

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Culture permeates every aspect of life. It influences the amounts of different strengths, the values towards different strengths, scores on different positive psychology measures, and certainly how different interventions and activities work for people. Cultural influences often support one's beliefs about what constitutes a fulfilling life and how to attain it.

Consider the concept of moderators. These elements play a pivotal role in altering the correlation between positive psychology and wellbeing. Do they elevate your wellbeing, diminish it, or have no discernible impact? Essentially, a moderator changes the relationship between two variables.

Examining cultural perspectives on leading a 'good' life reveals diversity in Western and Eastern philosophies. Western traditions provide a wealth of insights: **Aristotle**, the Athenian philosopher, outlined 11 virtues, including courage, truth, justice, and generosity. **Judeo-Christian** teachings encompass the Ten Commandments, virtues such as faith, hope, and charity from the Old Testament, and values like kindness to the poor and seeking peace from the Talmud. **Islam** emphasizes gratitude and love for Allah, kindness to parents, justice, and courage. Among the **Anishinaabe** (Ojibwe) people, the Seven Grandfathers teachings prioritize wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, truth, and humility.

In contrast, Eastern philosophies offer complementary perspectives: **Confucianism** emphasizes altruism, sensitivity to others' feelings, wisdom, and truthfulness. **Taoism** advocates for living harmoniously with the universe, highlighting humanity, justice, propriety, and balance. **Buddhism** promotes compassion, love, and equanimity, urging individuals to prioritize the welfare of others.

Individualism prioritizes individual concerns over those of the group, fostering independence and self-reliance. In contrast, **collectivism** prioritizes the group, emphasizing interdependence and conformity to group norms. Individuals in collectivist cultures prioritize fulfilling cultural norms and derive happiness from goals that benefit others. They prioritize family ties and harmony in social interactions.

For example, in East Asian cultures, achieving harmony is central, and the primary value revolves around familial belonging. Seeking social support is often avoided to maintain this harmony. In Latino/Hispanic cultures, happiness perceptions are impacted by inequalities. Warmth and expressiveness within the family are cherished, with family serving as the foremost source of support.

💡 Think about it:

How do you believe this could influence the effectiveness of certain positive psychology activities? Are there specific activities you think might be affected? Have you observed firsthand how your cultural background influenced the impact of certain class activities on your well-being, whether they were successful in improving it?

Dr. Kristin Layous and colleagues[2] examined how culture influences the effectiveness of happiness-boosting activities. They found that while participants from the US benefited greatly from gratitude interventions, those from South Korea experienced fewer benefits from the same activity. However, both groups showed similar increases in well-being when engaging in acts of kindness. However, this is partially attributed to differences in effort. Americans often believe that happiness is within their control and can be achieved through sheer determination. In contrast, in Korean culture, the word for happiness translates to "fortunate" or "lucky blessing" (Oishi et al., 2012)[3]. Additionally, the cultural emphasis on maintaining a balance between negative and positive experiences may also contribute to these differences.

Although gratitude generally boosts positive emotions for everyone, Titova et al. (2017)[4] found that Asian Americans and Indians, who tend to have collectivist orientations, experienced increases in guilt and sadness after writing gratitude letters to individuals in their lives. On the other hand, optimism interventions, which concentrate on envisioning one's best future self, did not display any cultural interaction.

First Impressions

Upon meeting someone, we often find ourselves making quick judgements: How friendly is this person? How trustworthy are they? However, understanding the factors that shape these initial assessments is key.

In a study at Stanford University (Tsai et al., 2019)[5], students who preferred experiencing heightened positive emotions, such as excitement and enthusiasm, were more inclined to exhibit behaviors like sharing money, initiating conversations, placing trust, and selecting leaders who displayed similarly excited expressions in photos. Interestingly, there were cultural variations observed: European American students tended to gravitate towards individuals with excited facial expressions, while East Asian students often preferred individuals with calmer demeanors when assessing traits like trustworthiness and friendliness. This phenomenon, known as "ideal affect," significantly influences how individuals perceive friendliness and trustworthiness. Why do you think ideal affect is associated with these specific preferences and variations?

Ideal affect can shape decisions beyond preferences, impacting choices such as selecting healthcare providers and adhering to doctors orders. A study showed that individuals tend to follow medical advice more when their doctor reflects their ideal affect (Sims & Tsai, 2015)[6].

> ✏️ Definition: Individualism
>
> prioritizes individual concerns over those of the group, fostering independence and self-reliance

> ✏️ Definition: Collectivism
>
> prioritizes the group, emphasizing interdependence and conformity to group norms

Attribution

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8.2: Ideal Affect: How People Want to Feel

Ideal affect refers to how people want to feel, as compared to how they actually feel. While most people seek to feel good, the specific emotional states vary, and different cultures prioritize different aspects of well-being.

The Affect Validation Index (AVI)[7], crafted in 2001 by Jeanne Tsai and Brian Knutson, serves to differentiate between two crucial emotional dimensions: **ideal affect**, representing the states individuals value or ideally aspire to feel, and **actual affect**, signifying the emotions they truly experience. When Tsai and Knutson initiated their research, the concept of "ideal affect" had been largely overlooked by scholars, prompting them to devise a method for its measurement. Cultural influence heavily shapes our responses in this regard. The role of genetics in this question is often raised, and while it remains a possibility, immigration studies suggest that culture exerts a greater influence.

Research exploring differences in ideal affect across cultures are visible in practices, institutions, and products. Notably, children's storybooks in the United States, as observed by Tsai et al. (2007)[8], feature more excited expressions compared to the bestselling children's books in Taiwan.

Fear of Happiness

Culture plays a crucial role in how happiness is perceived, as not everyone shares the same desire for happiness– not everyone wants to be happy. While Western cultures often see happiness as universally desirable, cultural beliefs shape individual views, similar to how they influence ideal affect. In some societies, there's a fear surrounding happiness. For instance, some cultures associate joy with subsequent misfortune, while others view expressing happiness as inviting envy, which can lead to hardships. Moreover, certain cultures perceive smiling as a sign of dishonesty or foolishness, contributing to reservations about embracing happiness. These cultural perspectives fuel the notion that creativity and happiness are incompatible, fostering a fear of happiness within these communities. Learn more by reading Dr. Mohsen Joshanloo and Dr. Dan Weijers paper, Aversion to Happiness Across Cultures: A Review of Where and Why People are Averse to Happiness[9].

> 📌 Activity: Your Happiness
>
> Take a moment now to jot down your specific personal definition of happiness
>
> 1. Take a moment to jot down your specific personal definition of happiness.
> 2. After doing so, note, is there any element of negativity in your personal definition?
> 3. Was your definition strictly positive or does it have other emotions mixed in?
>   1. If no, how would you revise your definition to include negative emotions or feelings?
>   2. Can you? (Discuss with a friend or peer briefly)

Americans tend to savor positive emotions more than Japanese, while East Asians, including Japanese individuals, are more likely to dampen enjoyment (Miyamoto & Ma, 2011[10]; Lindberg, 2004[11]). Across cultures, there's a tendency to dampen positive moods and focus on negative aspects (Bryant & Verof, 2007)[12]. Reflecting Taoist principles of balance, Chinese and Koreans often believe in the reversal of happiness, anticipating a shift from positivity to negativity over time (Suh & Koo, 2008[13]; Ji et al., 2001[14]).

Often, it's not solely a matter of cultural influence. It frequently stems from those close to us who have shaped our behavior, teaching us to conceal our joy and view gloom as a safer option. Alternatively, growing up around family members whose typical mood leaned towards negativity can also play a significant role.

Thus, feeling sad, anxious, or depressed can become ingrained as the norm — a defensive strategy for navigating life. The School of Life released a video titled *The Fear of Happiness*[15], exploring the apprehension towards happiness due to its unfamiliarity.

It is important to explore cultural differences in viewing and pursuing happiness like this while learning about Positive Psychology. It can be often assumed that everyone wants to be happy and do things to achieve happiness, although, as fear of happiness and ideal affect demonstrate, it is not always the case. This also has a very important practical implication of using activities designed to promote happiness, as they should not be applied to all without a better understanding of the cultural context in which they might be occurring. Research has shown that cultural differences in experiencing emotions and understanding of happiness lead to varied results when the same activities are performed by different cultural groups.

> ### 🔖 READ List
>
> Read Chapter 6, *Positive Psychology within a Cultural Context*[16], in *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*.
>
> Afterwards, read Dr. Jeanne Tsai's teachings on Culture and Emotion[17], published on NOBA.
>
> If you would like to learn more from Dr. Jeanne Tsai, read her article in the *Perspectives on Psychological Sciences* titled, *Ideal Affect: Cultural Causes and Behavioral Consequences*[18].

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9: Clinical and Health Applications

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9.1: Positive Psychology in Clinical Practice

> ◗ **Learning Objectives**
>
> Upon reading this chapter, the reader should be able to:
>
> - Understand what positive health is and how it differs from traditional notions of health.
> - Explore why positive psychology is crucial for managing chronic diseases today.
> - Identify specific health benefits linked to positive emotions.
> - Discuss how positive factors influence health outcomes.

Approach to Mental Health

Mental illness affects a significant portion of the population, with one in five adults experiencing some form of mental health condition. Among these, nearly one in twenty-five individuals live with a serious mental illness.

Traditional clinical approaches often follow a "fix-what's-wrong" framework that centers on deficits. This approach typically involves assessing symptoms and problems, followed by treatment aimed at reducing negative thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and relational difficulties. The ultimate objective is to promote wellness by alleviating symptoms and addressing underlying issues, thus guiding the pathway from identification through intervention to improved mental health outcomes.

In positive clinical psychology, the approach shifts towards emphasizing strengths rather than deficits. It begins with a thorough assessment that considers not just symptoms and problems, but also identifies strengths and personal values. Treatment focuses on enhancing positive thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and relationships. The goal is to achieve wellness by aligning behaviors with personal values, utilizing strengths effectively, and reducing symptoms. This approach aims to empower individuals by leveraging their inherent strengths to promote growth and well-being.

Positive psychology can complement traditional psychotherapy by offering strategies that differ in focus. While traditional therapy typically focuses on reducing distress and addressing existing problems, positive psychology emphasizes building strengths and promoting success. Balancing both prevention and enhancement approaches is crucial in this context.

Shifting more focus towards primary prevention in positive psychology can be particularly impactful. By preventing issues before they arise, this approach has the potential to reach a larger number of individuals and promote overall well-being more effectively.

Dr. Nancy Sin and Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky's 2009[1] meta-analysis of 51 studies involving 4,266 individuals found that positive therapy interventions significantly enhance well-being (r = 0.29) and decrease depressive symptoms (r = 0.31). Factors such as initial depression status, self-selection into therapy, older age, individualized sessions, and longer treatment durations were linked to greater effectiveness. Positive therapy's impact on reducing depressive symptoms was comparable to standard psychotherapy for depression. These findings highlight its potential as a valuable approach in mental health treatment.

In 2005[2], Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson conducted a study involving 577 participants. They utilized an online intervention to measure changes in both happiness and depression levels among the participants.

- Participants in the **Gratitude** intervention wrote and delivered a letter expressing gratitude.
- Those in the **Three good things** intervention wrote about positive experiences and their causes nightly.
- The **You at your best** intervention involved reflecting on past positive experiences and personal strengths.
- Participants in the **Using strengths** intervention identified and applied a strength daily in a new way.
- In the **Identifying strengths** intervention, participants generally used identified strengths more often.

The **Gratitude** intervention appeared to have the greatest impact on happiness, while the **Three good things** intervention likely had the most impact on reducing depression. These findings highlight the effectiveness of positive psychology practices in improving well-being and managing depressive symptoms.

Positive Psychology Includes several Effective Therapeutic Approaches

Well-Being Therapy (Fava et al., 2004)[3] is a structured method focusing on problem-solving and enhancing environment mastery, personal growth, purpose, autonomy, self-acceptance, and positive relationships.

Positive Psychotherapy (Rashid, 2008)[4], based on Seligman's happiness theory, involves 14 sessions that integrate strengths, gratitude, forgiveness, optimism, love/attachment, savoring positive experiences, and finding meaning in life.

Strengths-Centered Therapy (Wong, 2006)[5] emphasizes validating strengths (**expliticizing**), setting goals aligned with them (**envisioning**), boosting motivation (**empowering**), and facilitating ongoing application of strengths beyond therapy (**evolving**). It aligns with Seligman's framework of the pleasant life, engaged life, and meaningful life.
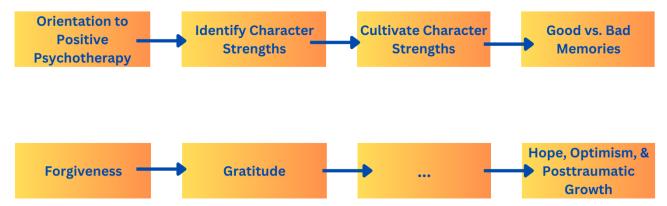

📌 WATCH List

To gain a clear understanding of positive psychotherapy, watch Dr. Russ Curtis, a professor of counseling, demonstrate a counseling role play session[6].

Then, watch Dr. Russ Curtis demonstrate how to utilize strengths in Positive Psychotherapy in another counseling role play session[7].

Positive Psychotherapy: Session-By-Session Example:

| Orientation to Positive Psychotherapy | → | Identify Character Strengths | → | Cultivate Character Strengths | → | Good vs. Bad Memories |

| Forgiveness | → | Gratitude | → | ... | → | Hope, Optimism, & Posttraumatic Growth |

Suicidality and Hope

Suicidality and hope are examined in the research by Beck et al. (1990)[8] involving 1,958 outpatients. They found that scores on the Beck Hopelessness Scale accurately predicted 94.2% of suicides, with patients scoring over 9 being 11 times more likely to die by suicide.

This is where hope comes into play. Clinical approaches, as discussed by Lopez, Floyd, Ulven, and Snyder (2000)[9], focus on fostering hope through various strategies:

- **Hope finding:** Helping individuals develop narratives that highlight instances of hope in their past or present.
- **Hope bonding:** Cultivating hope within the therapeutic relationship to enhance trust and collaboration.
- **Hope enhancing:** Facilitating improvements in goal-setting and behavioral strategies to achieve those goals.
- **Hope reminding:** Encouraging clients to recognize and embrace their own capacity for hope autonomously.

According to Snyder (2002)[10], hope is characterized by the ability to envision multiple pathways to achieve a goal (pathways thinking) and the motivation to utilize those pathways (agency). These approaches highlight the importance of instilling, developing, and reinforcing hope as a crucial component in therapeutic interventions aimed at reducing suicidality and promoting well-being. As we discussed in the previous, along with hope, it is also important to consider the role of culture.

Cultural Considerations

Joshanloo (2014)[11] outlines differences between Western and Eastern philosophies of well-being. Western views emphasize self-enhancement, hedonism, mastery, satisfaction, and avoiding suffering, while Eastern perspectives prioritize self-transcendence, eudaimonism, harmony, contentment, and spiritual values. Take a moment to reflect on how these cultural characteristics play a role in positive psychology- it might be a good idea to review the previous chapter on culture.

Definitions

Explicitizing
 validating and highlighting strengths

Envisioning
 identifying strengths and goal utility

Empowering
 boost motivation and empowerment, using strengths

Evolving
 termination and facilitating continued strengths use outside

Hope Finding
 helping individuals develop narratives that highlight instances of hope in their past or present

Hope Bonding
 cultivating hope within the therapeutic relationship to enhance trust and collaboration

Hope Enhancing

facilitating improvements in goal-setting and behavioral strategies to achieve those goals

Hope Reminding

encouraging clients to recognize and embrace their own capacity for hope autonomously

Attribution

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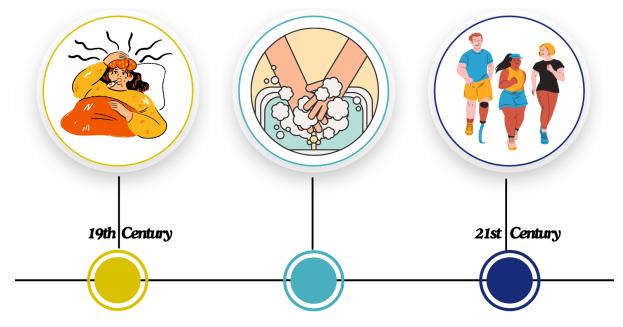
9.2: Positive Psychology & Health

How can positive emotions improve our physical wellness?

Typically, illness manifests through general complaints (such as self-reported symptoms), specific physical symptoms, observable bodily damage, the presence of pathogenic agents (e.g., viruses, bacteria), diagnosed conditions, impaired daily activities, or a shortened lifespan.

Health is more than just not being sick, according to the World Health Organization[12]. It encompasses complete physical, mental, and social well-being, along with factors like spiritual health, occupational satisfaction, safety, and life balance. Interestingly, these broader aspects of wellness are often overlooked in health outcome studies.

Superior health can be recognized by several indicators, such as experiencing fewer and shorter bouts of illness, quicker healing of wounds, enhanced ability to recover from physical challenges, and possessing greater physiological capacity.

History of Illness

Throughout history, the approach to illness has evolved through three major eras. Initially, the focus was primarily on treating individuals once they became ill. This approach lasted until the mid 19th century.

The introduction of Germ Theory marked a shift towards prevention. This era saw the implementation of practices such as surgeon handwashing, food inspection, and advancement in medicine aimed at eliminating disease-causing pathogens.

In more recent times, there has been a growing emphasis on health promotion. Recognizing that health encompasses more than just avoiding germs, peple are encouraged to take proactive steps to maintain well-being. This includes engaging in fitness activities, monitoring blood pressure, enhancing resilience to stress, and building overall physical and mental health.
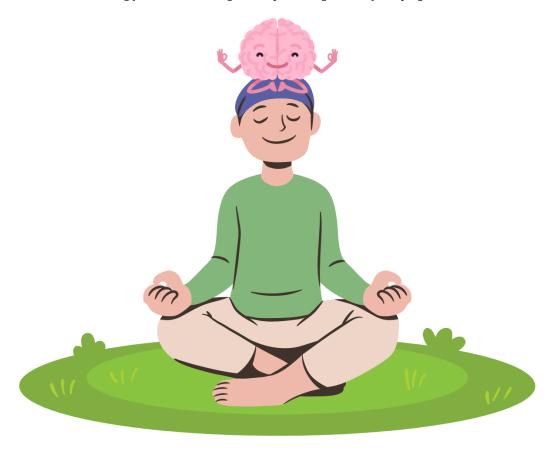
An important aspect to consider is the shift in causes of death from the past to the present. Today, our leading causes of death include heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and chronic respiratory diseases — conditions that typically progress slowly compared to infectious diseases like influenza, pneumonia, and plague, which historically led to quicker mortality. The chronic nature of these illnesses prompts important questions about quality of life. As a result, psychologists are studying whether attitudes and health behaviors can significantly impact the management and potential alleviation of these conditions. Dr. Sarah Pressman and Dr. Sheldon Cohen discuss positive affect and its relationship to disease in their paper titled *Does positive affect influence health?*[13]

Health Practices

Maintaining a positive outlook enhances the likelihood of adopting healthy habits like regular exercise and a nutritious diet rich in fruits and vegetables. It also reduces the tendency to engage in risky behaviors. On the other hand, stress and anxiety often lead to

behaviors such as consuming junk food, smoking, and experiencing difficulty sleeping.

The mind-body connection has been debated for centuries. Aristotle viewed the mind and body as interconnected, whereas Descartes proposed they are separate entities. Recent research confirms that the brain and body communicate extensively, highlighting their intertwined influence on health and well-being.

There are entire fields dedicated to exploring this topic. Health Psychology applies psychological theories to physical health. Behavioral Medicine expands medical approaches to include psychological factors in health and illness. Psychoneuroimmunology/Psychoneuroendocrinology investigates how psychological, neurological, and immunological/hormonal factors interact with each other.

In 1975, Dr. Ader and Dr. Cohen[14] conducted a study where they trained rats to drink sugar water paired with an immune-suppressing drug. After conditioning, even when the rats drank sugar water without the drug, their immune systems remained suppressed. This study demonstrated that learning can impact the immune system. Consider how these findings relate to the placebo effect.

In an experiment led by Dr. Mark Schaller and colleagues (2010)[15], researchers found that observing the symptoms of a sick individual leads to a more aggressive immune response in their own immune system.

Is there Evidence that Happiness Improves Immunity?

Numerous studies demonstrate connections between positive emotions and the immune system. These studies have shown immune changes resulting from activities such as watching funny movies, listening to happy music, undergoing hypnosis to induce happiness, and self-reporting feelings of happiness. These immune-related outcomes include effects on allergy responses, vaccine responses, and changes in immune cell levels in blood and saliva samples.

Positive emotion has been linked to accelerated wound healing. Research conducted by Robles, Brooks, and Pressman (2009)[16] revealed that for every unit increase in positive affect (PA), there was approximately a 1% increase in wound recovery within the first hour (p = .04). Interestingly, there was no significant relationship observed between negative affect (NA) and skin barrier

recovery. Additionally, these effects were not attributed to baseline differences in skin function, as neither positive nor negative affect were associated with basal skin function.

In another study examining happiness and its impact on susceptibility to colds, participants were exposed to cold viruses and interviewed regularly. Researchers sought to determine whether individuals reporting higher levels of positive emotions were less likely to develop cold symptoms compared to those reporting lower levels of positivity. The findings indicated that individuals with higher levels of positive emotions had a reduced risk of catching a cold (Cohen et al., 2003)[17].

Changes in immunity occur through the action of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline. These hormones increase during periods of stress and can suppress the immune system. The reason behind this suppression is that elevated levels of stress hormones can hinder the immune system's ability to function effectively.

When you experience positive emotions, the levels of these stress hormones tend to decrease. This reduction in stress hormones allows your immune system to operate more efficiently. Similarly, positive emotions not only impact immune function but also have the potential to influence cardiovascular function.

Cardiovascular Function

You can easily influence your own heart rate. While exercise is known to raise your heart rate, what may surprise you is that positive emotions can also have a similar effect.

Activity: Let's see how this works:

1. What is your pulse?
   1. Each heartbeat generates a wave of pressure as blood moves through the arteries. This pressure wave can be felt as a pulse where arteries are closest to the skin's surface. In adults, a normal resting pulse ranges from **60 to 100 beats per minute**.
   2. Tip: **Use your fingers when finding a pulse**. Don't use your thumb, as it has its own pulse. For more detailed information on finding your pulse, check out this wikiHow article on How to Check Your Pulse[18].
   3. Record the rate, strength, and rhythm of your pulse.
2. Now, watch and follow this Gratitude Meditation with Deepak Chopra[19].
3. As soon as the meditation is over, take your heart rate again.
4. Compare the difference in heart rate.

Laughter

Laughter Yoga, also known as Hasyayoga, involves self-induced laughter that is purely physical and does not depend on humor or comedy. This practice was developed by Indian guru Jiten Kohi.

Laughter is often called "the best medicine". It relaxes the entire body by relieving physical tension and stress, with its effects lasting up to 45 minutes afterward. Studies have shown that laughter can even open up arteries and reduce blood pressure.

Furthermore, laughter boosts the immune system by decreasing stress hormones and increasing immune cells and infection-fighting antibodies, thereby enhancing resistance to disease. It also triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals, promoting an overall sense of well-being and offering temporary pain relief.

In terms of cardiovascular health, laughter improves the function of blood vessels and enhances blood flow. These effects can contribute to protecting the heart against conditions like heart attacks and other cardiovascular issues.

Take a look at this article by U.S. News on how Laughter Can Boost Heart Health[20].

These changes in heart rate are significant because they can predict your future health. The way your heart functions when you are young can predict your risk of developing conditions like hypertension (high blood pressure) and heart disease later in life. Studies have shown that even the way your heart responds to stress in a controlled laboratory setting can predict these health outcomes approximately 20 years later.

Morbidity

Positive emotions are linked to improved health outcomes, reducing the likelihood of various morbidities such as stroke, accidents among teenagers, falls in the elderly, re-hospitalization after heart surgery, and even susceptibility to the common cold.

In a study by Dr. Danner, Dr. Snowden, and Dr. Friesen (2001)[21], 180 Catholic nuns wrote autobiographies at age 22, which were later analyzed for positive emotion content. Over the next six decades, they were monitored to study mortality rates and other life outcomes, with the autobiographies coded for the frequency and variety of positive emotion words used. The study found that positive emotions expressed in autobiographies written in early life were strongly linked to longer life spans six decades later.

In a similar study, Dr. Sarah Pressman and Dr. Sheldon Cohen (2012)[22] examined the use of positive emotion words and longevity among renowned deceased psychologists. Their findings indicated that using more activated positive emotional words (such as lively, vigorous, attentive, humorous) was linked to longer lifespans.

Limitations in the Field

There are certain challenges in the field regarding the directionality of associations. It's debated whether positive emotions lead to better health or if good health leads to greater happiness. The likely answer is that both relationships exist simultaneously.
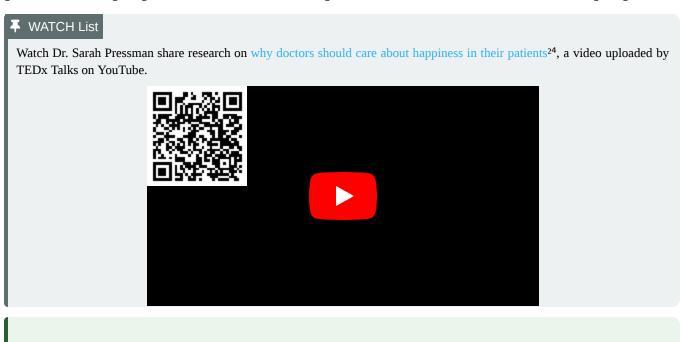
To address this in research, experimental studies and longitudinal prospective research designs are used. These methods help to understand the complex interactions between positive emotions, health outcomes, and happiness over time.

Positive emotions do not always guarantee life-saving benefits, especially when considering survival outcomes in deadly diseases. Existing studies on survival outcomes lack consistency, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions. Overall, positive emotions have shown varying effects: diseases with longer prognoses tend to correlate with increased survival rates, while diseases with high short-term mortality rates do not consistently benefit from positive emotions.

When tumor cells are already replicating at a high rate or when a kidney has failed, it's crucial to be realistic. At these advanced stages, while happiness may enhance quality of life, it typically does not affect life expectancy.

Culture in Positive Health

The role of culture in the positive health connection has largely been overlooked in health psychology, but there is a growing awareness of its importance. For example, research has shown that not all positive variables impact health in different cultures (Wiley et al., 2022)[23]. In the cited study, we found that among African Americans (AA), there was a slight increase (0.08) in the incidence of colds compared to European Americans (EA) when positive emotional style (PES) was kept constant. This means PES had less impact on preventing colds for AA compared to EA individuals. However, we did not find a significant effect between race and negative emotional style (NES) in relation to cold incidence. Furthermore, among AAs, there was a 0.60 increase in the incidence of colds compared to EAs when self-esteem was held constant. This means that higher self-esteem was associated with a greater likelihood of getting sick for AAs, whereas for EAs, higher self-esteem was linked to a lower likelihood of getting sick.

📌 WATCH List

Watch Dr. Sarah Pressman share research on why doctors should care about happiness in their patients[24], a video uploaded by TEDx Talks on YouTube.

> **⚙ READ List**
>
> Read this brief article by Dr. Sarah Pressman and Dr. Sheldon Cohen on Positive Affect and Health[25], published in the Current Directions in Psychological Science Journal

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

10: Reducing Stress with Positive Psychology

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10.1: Stress and Positive Psychology

⅏ READ List

Read the article *Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human* (2004)[1] by George Bonnano which explores the concept of resilience.

We will be going over concepts discussed in earlier chapters, so read this brief article on the *Undoing Effect of Positive Emotions*[2] by Penn State University.

Afterwards, review the positive effects of social support on stress in *The Stress-Buffering Hypothesis* (2004)[3], a paper written by Dr. Sarah Pressman and Dr. Sheldon Cohen.

Read this brief article *Mindfulness meditation: A research-proven way to reduce stress* (2019)[4] to learn what mindfulness is and why it is beneficial for stress and well-being.

Also, read *The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions*[5] by Dr. Barbara Fredrickson.

⚑ WATCH List

Watch Dr. Richard Davidson discuss Mindfulness and its potential to enhance resilience to stress in this video uploaded by NourFoundation on YouTube called *Can Mindfulness Increase Our Resilience to Stress*[6].

? Guiding Questions

1. What are the definitions of resilience and recovery?
2. What is the evidence that resilience is a common experience?
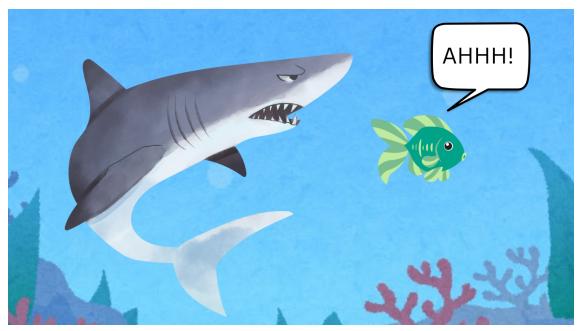3. What are some characteristics tied to greater resilience to stress?

Stress is a certainty. Your stress response, however, is much more variable and malleable. While challenging situations occur, your response to stress doesn't have to be negative.

In life, expecting no setbacks guarantees disappointment. The key lies in effectively managing our responses to these challenges and equipping ourselves with a robust set of tools to combat them. As humans, we inevitably face daily hassles, major life events, and more. While adversity is unavoidable, enduring suffering is not our only option.

What is Psychological Stress?

Psychological stress is a state of mental or emotional strain caused by challenging circumstances. It encompasses the emotional and physiological reactions that occur when an individual confronts situations that exceed their coping abilities. It occurs when perceived demands surpass one's perceived or actual ability to cope.

Psychological stress manifests as mental or emotional strain resulting from challenging circumstances. It involves both emotional and physiological reactions triggered when individuals face situations beyond their coping capabilities. This state activates the body, increasing arousal and mobilizing energy through physiological changes such as heightened heart rate. It enhances focus and allocates resources to prepare for a potential fight-or-flight responses.

The fight-or-flight response is a rapid physiological reaction triggered by sympathetic nervous system activation. It increases blood flow to muscles, heart rate, and blood pressure, dilates pupils, and enhances airway function while inhibiting digestive and urinary activities. Stress hormones like epinephrine, norepinephrine, and cortisol are released, mobilizing energy and suppressing non-essential functions for immediate survival. While beneficial in the short term, chronic activation of these systems due to prolonged stress can lead to physiological and psychological exhaustion, impacting overall health.

The "rest and digest" response involves parasympathetic nervous system activation. During this phase, digestion is enhanced, facilitating nutrient absorption and supporting growth and repair processes within the body. Additionally, activities associated with the "fight-flight" response, such as heart rate, are decreased, promoting a state of relaxation and recuperation.

Positive Psychology offers significant insights into how we make **appraisals**—evaluating situations for their potential impact, significance, and threat. It examines the nature of these appraisals, how they influence our response to stressors, and our ability to recover from them. Primary appraisal assesses the meaning of the situation. Secondary appraisal is our assessment of the resources we have that are available for coping. Positive psychology can make a difference on stress if we do have the resources to cope.

According to the stress buffering hypothesis, the undoing hypothesis suggests a mechanism through which positive emotions can mitigate stress. It proposes that positive emotions have an "undoing effect," accelerating recovery from stress. For instance, in a study where participants watched a sad film, researchers observed whether participants spontaneously smiled. Those who smiled during the film returned to their normal cardiovascular state more rapidly compared to those who did not smile, providing support for the undoing hypothesis (Fredrickson & Levinson, 1998)[7].

Recovery strategies are likely familiar to you when feeling overwhelmed by stress. If you find yourself in such a situation, it's important to calm down and consider what actions you can take.

One effective approach is meditation, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. This practice involves focusing on the present moment, being non-judgmental, letting go of negative thoughts, concentrating on your breathing, and accepting whatever is happening.

Other effective strategies include engaging in breathing exercises, finding distractions, releasing pent-up energy through physical activity like exercise, ensuring sufficient rest to restore your energy levels, and consciously focusing on the positive aspects of your situation—perhaps even something as simple as a smile.

In a study by Dr. Kraft and Pressman (2012)[8], researchers examined the impact of covertly manipulating positive facial expressions on cardiovascular and emotional responses to stress. They found that participants who smiled, regardless of awareness, exhibited lower heart rates during stress recovery compared to those with neutral expressions, indicating both physiological and psychological benefits from maintaining positive facial expressions during stress.

The Broaden-and-Build theory suggests that positive emotions, like gratitude, expand the range of thoughts, actions, and attention. This process, as proposed by Fredrickson and Branigan (2005)[9] and Le Nguyen and Fredrickson (2017)[10], contributes to the accumulation of long-term resources across physical, psychological, social, and intellectual domains, potentially aiding individuals during times of stress.

Positive emotions can play a crucial role in managing stress. In primary appraisals, we may either disregard stressors as irrelevant, reinterpret threats as opportunities or challenges that can be overcome, or reassess the severity of negative situations. In secondary appraisals, we adjust our perceptions of coping abilities and strategies to reduce stress more effectively and promote quicker recovery. For instance, seeking support from friends to discuss stressors rather than turning to substance abuse, or utilizing knowledge to actively solve problems rather than avoiding them due to uncertainty.

Positive emotions are also important in the coping process. The revised stress and coping model includes positive emotions in the stress process and highlights how positive emotions help restore physiological and psychosocial coping resources. You can take a look at the model by Dr. Susan Folkman in a paper titled *Positive psychological states and coping with severe stress[11]*.

📌 WATCH List

Our ability to leverage our mindset is profound: by reinterpreting stressors, we can change how our bodies respond (stress re-appraisal). For example, viewing stress as not inherently harmful can alter its physiological effects. Kelly McGonigal explores this concept in her TED talk *How to make stress your friend*[12], emphasizing how our attitude towards stress can redefine its impact.

Alia Crum's[13] research further underscores this idea, demonstrating that our beliefs about stress significantly influence its effects on us. Embracing stress as potentially enhancing rather than purely negative can lead to distinct physiological and psychological outcomes.

Dr. Alia Crum explains the power of mindsets in this video uploaded by the World Economic Forum titled *The science of how mindset transforms the human experience[14]*.

Challenge vs. Threat Appraisals

The Biopsychosocial Model of Threat explains how various physiological signals impact health and performance, influenced by our interpretation of stressors. When perceiving a situation as a threat—for example, feeling overwhelmed due to inadequate preparation—the typical response might involve giving up or avoiding the challenge. This perception triggers the release of cortisol, a stress hormone. Conversely, interpreting a situation as a challenge—anticipating the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge or skill—typically leads to proactive responses such as preparation and approaching the problem directly. For instance, viewing a challenge as an opportunity to learn something new, show knowledge gained through hard work, and demonstrate competence versus viewing it pessimistically as inevitable failure with no potential for improvement.

What Does it Mean to be Resilient?

Resilience refers to our ability to adapt effectively to difficult situations. It's often described as the capacity to "bounce back" from challenges and adversity. This trait is fundamental, essential for navigating life's stressful events and circumstances successfully. It helps individuals cope and thrive in the face of various trials they encounter.

In the short term, effective stress responses involve becoming less reactive to stress, recovering quickly from stressful situations, not perceiving certain events as stressful initially, and avoiding long-term mental or physical harm caused by stress. Viewing stress as a challenge rather than a threat is also crucial for maintaining a healthy stress response over time.

Coping

Utilizing effective coping skills can significantly enhance resilience by aiming to mitigate the harmful psychological and physiological impacts of stress. Coping strategies encompass a wide array of cognitive and behavioral methods that individuals employ to manage stressful situations. It's important to recognize that there are both healthy and unhealthy ways of coping with stress. Negative examples include behaviors such as insufficient or excessive sleep, alcohol and drug use, excessive social media consumption (doomscrolling), avoidance, and unhealthy eating habits.

> ### 📌 Activity: Improve your Coping with Positive Psychology
>
> **Think about the last time that you faced a major stressor? One that really did make you feel overwhelmed, aroused, and/or it took a while to get over.**
>
> 1. Please list the coping strategies you used. Describe how each strategy affected your emotions and outcomes.
>   - Some examples of coping: active coping, planning, positive reframing, acceptance, humor, religion, using emotional support, using instrumental support, self-distraction, denial, venting, substance use, behavioral disengagement, and self-blame.
> 2. Think of a time when you were **resilient** to stress. Maybe you didn't have a strong reaction to the stressor, you were able to believe you could conquer it, or you were just able to handle it it really well and get over it quickly.
>   - What types of coping strategies did you use this time? How did it feel? What happened?
> 3. Based on what you just learned, what strategies will you use next time you face a major stressor?
>   - What new strategies could you try (e.g., things you learned from this textbook) that would help you become more resilient to stress?

10 Healthy Coping Strategies

1. Positive reappraisal/benefit finding
2. Problem-solving
3. Acceptance
4. Humor/laughter
5. Practicing Gratitude
6. Meditation & mindfulness
7. Self-compassion
8. Seeking social support
9. Exercising
10. Engaging in a fun hobby

Research has identified several coping strategies empirically linked to resilience. One effective approach is positive reappraisal or benefit finding, where individuals seek out the positive aspects or silver linings in negative events. It's important to remember that this list isn't comprehensive, as different strategies work better for different people. Factors such as cultural background, specific circumstances, socioeconomic status, and individual personality traits can all influence how effective these coping strategies are in promoting resilience.

> ✏️ **Definition: Appraisals**
>
> evaluating situations for their potential impact, significance, and threat

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10.2: Mindfulness

The Power of Observation

The mind includes all our experiences—sensations, feelings, thoughts, intellect, and emotions—arising from specific conditions. Understanding the mind is essentially understanding our experiences.

Meditation comprises a family of self-regulation practices aimed at training attention and awareness to enhance voluntary control over mental processes. It promotes overall mental well-being and fosters specific abilities like calmness, clarity, and concentration. There are numerous types of meditation techniques available.Mindfulness meditation being one that we will go over.

Mindfulness involves paying close attention. It is a deliberate observation of both internal thoughts and external surroundings in the present moment. It promotes a flexible mindset, encouraging openness to new perspectives and the active process of making distinctions. Practicing mindfulness helps us stay attuned to our current context and perspective, originating from Eastern meditation practices and now widely adapted for secular use in Western mental health settings.

Mindfulness encompasses cognitive ability, reflecting how people differ in their capacity to think in a mindful way. It also includes disposition, comparable to stable personality traits like extraversion or neuroticism. Additionally, mindfulness is considered a cognitive style, indicating one's preferred approach to thinking and processing information.

The facets of mindfulness involve overcoming the desire to reduce uncertainty in daily life, overriding the tendency to engage in automatic behavior, and reducing the frequency of evaluating oneself, others, and situations.

Mindfulness is beneficial because it teaches us to see thoughts as passing events, reducing rumination and negative thought patterns. It helps us become less reactive to unpleasant experiences by gradually exposing us to them. Mindfulness encourages acceptance of the present moment without getting caught up in craving or aversion. Additionally, it has positive effects on both mental and physical health, reducing stress and allowing us to allocate more resources to our overall wellness.

Can Mindfulness Help with Negative Emotion?

Can mindfulness help with negative emotions? As society has evolved, our minds haven't necessarily kept pace with these changes. When we experience negative emotions, our bodies often react with a fight-or-flight response. Mindfulness interventions have shown promise in reducing this stress response. They operate through mechanisms like social support and prevention of reactive responses.

Mindfulness and emotion regulation strategies encompass cognitive reappraisal, where individuals alter their perspective on emotional stimuli. Expressive suppression involves allowing emotions to arise internally while concealing them outwardly. Meta-cognitive awareness fosters a de-centered view of oneself in relation to thoughts and feelings, enabling a neutral observation of personal experiences. Mindfulness enhances emotion regulation by boosting cognitive reappraisal, decreasing the use of suppression, and promoting metacognitive abilities.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

Meditation is a method for cultivating mindfulness. One prominent approach is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), particularly aimed at populations experiencing stress, such as those with anxiety disorders, chronic illnesses, or chronic pain. Developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn[15], MBSR is an 8-week program designed to promote hardiness by reframing challenges as manageable situations where individuals can take control. It also encourages coherence by helping participants find meaning and manageability in their experiences.

MBSR is widely recognized as the leading clinical practice of mindfulness and has been extensively researched. Studies indicate that its benefits can endure long after the program ends. Research, such as that by Chiesa and Serretti (2009)[16], suggests MBSR's effectiveness in reducing stress and anxiety, making it a valuable tool in stress management and emotional well-being.

Why do they Teach Mindfulness Meditation?

Mindfulness teaches individuals to cultivate a heightened state of awareness and concentration on the present moment, accepting it fully without getting caught up in stress or distractions. The goal is to enable people to engage with stressful situations mindfully, rather than reacting automatically. This approach emphasizes non-judgment and non-analysis, fostering awareness of one's breath, mind, and bodily sensations.

Mindfulness promotes the ability to sustain and focus attention, reducing susceptibility to distractions. It fosters equanimity, cultivating calmness in the presence of stress and pain, and decreasing reactive responses. Additionally, mindfulness enhances character and temperament, encouraging more positive interactions with others and the environment. Physiologically, mindfulness has been shown in EEG studies to increase patterns of relaxed brain activity and reduce responsiveness to stress, anxiety, and negative emotions.

Can we Train the Brain with Meditation?

In a longitudinal study by Zanesco et al. (2016)[17], participants were assessed before and after both 3-month and 1-month meditation retreats. Results showed meditators developed improved focused attention, reduced mind wandering, and enhanced mindfulness during tasks.

Rosenberg et al. (2015)[18] studied 60 participants undergoing three months of intensive meditation training or on a waitlist. The meditation group showed increased empathy and reduced feelings of rejection in emotional responses towards others.

Lazar (2005)[19] found that meditation might alter brain structure, with participants showing thicker brain regions associated with emotion, attention, and sensory processing compared to controls.

Mindfulness for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Core features of PTSD include avoidance, hyperarousal, emotional numbing, and negative emotions like shame, guilt, and dissociation.

Mindfulness components that could help include attention training, a mindful cognitive style, and non-judgmental awareness. Mindfully shifting attention to the present moment may improve attentional control and reduce bias towards trauma-related stimuli.

A mindful cognitive style may reduce rumination, lessening symptoms such as anxious arousal and anhedonia. Nonjudgmental acceptance of thoughts and emotions, taught through mindfulness, may also encourage facing fear-provoking stimuli, thereby reducing avoidance behaviors.

Interventions Related to Mindfulness Training

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is used to prevent the recurrence of major depressive disorder, rooted in the information-processing theory of relapse. It emphasizes the practice of observing thoughts without attachment, teaching that "thoughts are not facts" and fostering the understanding that "I am not my thoughts."

In addressing stress, MBCT works by intervening early to prevent negative thoughts from escalating into persistent patterns of rumination. It incorporates techniques such as Loving Kindness Meditation, which involves intentional exercises to cultivate kindness and compassion through verbal and visual practices. Additionally, relaxation exercises are utilized to promote calmness and reduce stress levels.

Mindfulness isn't a universal solution. While it may not always be effective and could even have drawbacks, it highlights the potential for meaningful change through simple adjustments in how we handle emotions and stress. This suggests that our responses are not fixed and can lead to significant improvements.

Attribution

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10.3: Subpage for Chapter One

Positive and Negative Emotions

Negative emotions have a lot of specific action tendencies that keep us alive.

For example:

- Fear → run away
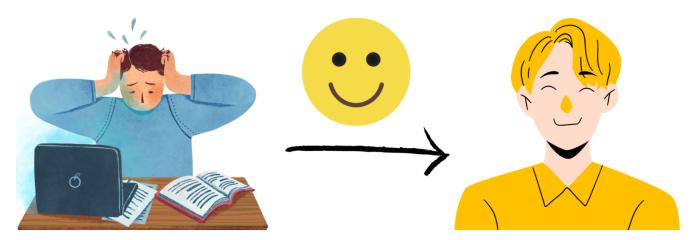- Disgust → spit out
- Anger → fight

All negative emotions involve focusing and attention narrowing. So, what does feeling positive do for you?

Positive emotions help us think more creatively and creatively problem solve. They also widen our attentional scope and open us to experiences. The broaden and build theory, for example, says that positive emotions help widen our thoughts and actions.

How is this helpful to survival, do you think? Positive emotions generally communicate safety to both oneself and others, often through actions like smiling. Consequently, these emotions facilitate the formation of relationships, provide support, and contribute to the development of skills and health.

Additionally, we will explore a couple hypotheses regarding the advantages of positive emotions starting with the undoing hypothesis. In psychology, **the undoing hypothesis** suggests that experiencing positive emotions after stressful situations can help alleviate their effects (i.e., psychological arousal and negative impact of the initial experience). Similarly, **the stress buffering hypothesis** proposes that social support can help protect individuals from the negative effects of stress.

Positive emotions can change:

1. How you appraise stress
2. How you respond to stress
3. How you recover from stress

Read Does Positive Affect Influence Health?[12], by Dr. Sarah D. Pressman and Dr. Sheldon Cohen, a paper on the association of **positive affect (PA)** and physical health.

Some other benefits of positive emotions include:

- Marker that we are flourishing
- Leads to growth, wellness, and better relationships over time
- Reduces/Cancels/Offers resilience against stress
- Resource when coping with (e.g., positive affect (PA) itself can produce esteem, confidence)
- Triggers <u>upward spirals</u> → finding meaning in bad → triggers PA → broadens thinking → find more meaning

Dr. Barbara Fredrickson and Dr. Thomas Joiner examine how positive emotions trigger upward spirals toward emotional well-being[13] (2002) to learn about the original work on the idea of upward spiraling.

The Broaden and Build Theory

The broaden and build theory (previously mentioned) tells us that positive emotions may activate us but in broad ways (versus negative that narrows us).

- Joy: play, be creative
- Content: savor the moment
- Pride: share good news
- Interest: explore

> These positive emotions broaden our awareness and encourages novel and exploratory thoughts and actions. Over time, this builds skills and resources.

Resource building through Broaden & Building:

- Intellectual Resources:
  - Develops problem solving skills
  - Learn new information
- Social Resources:
  - Strengthen existing bonds (e.g., friends, spouse)
  - Makes new bonds
- Physical Resources
  - Develops coordination
  - Develops strengths & cardiovascular health
- Psychological Resources

- Develops resilience & optimism
- Develops sense of identity

Positive psych interventions (PPI) are simple positive activities that increase well-being. Although PPIs (positive psych interventions) have generally been shown to be effective (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009)[14], not every positive activity that a person performs will increase their well-being. To understand when a PPI will work and why it sometimes doesn't, it helps to understand the "active ingredients" that contribute to their success, i.e., the ones that need to be present to build wellbeing. A central active ingredient in PPIs is positive emotions. Recent advances in affective science provide a solid foundation to understand both the specificity and variety of positive emotions. We're beyond simple/basic positive vs. negative categories.

Examples of Positive Psych Interventions (PPI):

• Writing letters expressing gratitude	• Acts of kindness
• Cultivating strengths	• Visualize positive future self
• Meditate	• Count blessings
• Savoring	

The positive activity model (Layous & Lymbomirsky 2013)[15] focuses on promoting well-being through engaging in activities that generate positive emotions and foster personal growth. This explains how simple activities change well-being. Moderators play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of activities aimed at increasing happiness. Various features of the activity, including dosage, variety, sequence, and the presence of built-in social support, can influence their success in boosting happiness levels.

For instance, greater variety is often associated with better outcomes, and certain activities may serve as better "starter" options. Moreover, different activities may have varying efficacy at different doses, and factors like whether they are outer-focused or inner-focused can interact with cultural differences, such as collectivist versus individualistic societies and time orientation. Additionally, individual characteristics, such as motivation to become happier, belief in the effectiveness of the activities, level of depression, and demographic factors, also influence the outcomes. Furthermore, the fit between the person and the activity is crucial, as enjoying an activity tends to lead to better overall results in terms of happiness enhancement.

One issue of this is that happiness is relative to your point of comparison. **The Social Comparison (SC) Theory** by Leon Festinger[16] states that individuals assess their own qualities and abilities by comparing themselves to others, which affects their self-esteem and emotions. In Social Comparison Theory, downward social comparison occurs when individuals compare themselves to others who they perceive as less fortunate, which has been linked to improved well-being in cancer patients. Conversely, upward social comparison can have both positive and negative effects, potentially serving as a source of inspiration or leading to a blow to one's self-esteem.

We generally hover around the same set point of well-being. The hedonic treadmill, also known as hedonic adaptation, is a theory positing that people repeatedly return to their baseline level of happiness, regardless of what happens to them. Changes that modify the impacts of exceptionally positive or negative events include contrast effects, where highly salient events diminish the influence of others, the introduction of new pleasures counteracted by the loss of old ones (such as gaining a large sum of money leading to new experiences but also diminishing the enjoyment of previous ones), and habituation, where the initial excitement or harm of something new gradually fades away, returning individuals to their baseline level of satisfaction.

Hedonic adaptation can be compared to a treadmill. The happiness treadmill, for example, is a concept where no matter how much running on it you do, you just stay in place (Deiner et al., 2009)[17]. We adapt pretty quickly (i.e., adapting to a bad smell). Our set point is based on our genetics and temperament.

Intentional activities matter because despite major positive or negative events or life changes, we quickly return to a relatively stable level of happiness. So, as a person makes more money, expectations and desires rise in tandem, which results in no permanent gain in happiness. Activities are the key to making lasting changes in happiness because such activities are more resistant to adaptation. We can deliberately engage in activities that make us happy while varying them enough to ward off adaptation.

> Interestingly, age matters for well-being too.

Interestingly, age matters for well-being too. The Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Susan Charles & Laura Carstensen, 2010)[18] states that the older we age, we focus less on negative emotions, engage more deeply with emotional content of days, and especially savor the good stuff (e.g., relationships). It's important to note that older people have a positivity bias where they remember good stuff more quickly and don't remember the bad stuff as much (Mather & Carstensen, 2005)[19].

In sum, we learned that positive emotions have functions that are different from negative emotions. These positive emotions are a key ingredient of intentional activities that can change our well-being. Well-being can be hard and slow to move (genetics, circumstances), but with intentional activities, we can change our daily positive emotions which can then change our behavior, deepen our well-being, and more.

Definitions

The Undoing Hypothesis
    experiencing positive emotions after stressful situations can help alleviate their effects
Stress Buffering Hypothesis
    proposes that social support can help protect individuals from the negative effects of stress
Positive Affect

the experience of pleasant emotions (i.e., happiness, joy, contentment)

The Positive Activity Model

focuses on promoting well-being through engaging in activities that generate positive emotions and foster personal growth

The Social Comparison (SC) Theory

individuals assess their own qualities and abilities by comparing themselves to others, which affects their self-esteem and emotions

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Glossary

Sample Word 1 | Sample Definition 1

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