

Positive Psychology

Can you remember feeling a sense of awe at a beautiful view, the thrill of landing a job or the giddy excitement of waiting for Father Christmas? While the moments themselves may have been brief, positive emotions aren't just about feeling good; they can also do us good. By Laura Sacha

Of course with depression especially these feelings can be all too scarce. It's the negative emotions that feel more powerful, last longer and weigh us down. Their evolutionary purpose was to alert us to danger and narrow our thinking so we could take action.

Who's it for?

Anyone can benefit from Positive Psychology, although with depression it's suited to milder forms

Try this for...

Boosting mood, building resilience and a sense of wellbeing

What it's about

Authentic positive emotions, engagement and meaning in life

What it's not

A sticky plaster of positive thinking

By their nature, positive emotions are lighter and more fleeting, but their long-term benefits in building our personal resources can be surprising.

Positive emotions help us to think more broadly and creatively, enabling us to spot solutions to problems. For example, joy can lead us to play, push the limits and be creative, and pride can help us to be ambitious and think big.

Happiness

Positive Psychology identifies three different types of happiness

- the Pleasant life – the pursuit of pleasure and positive emotions
- the Good Life – identifying our strengths and engaging in them
- the Meaningful Life – using our strengths for a greater, higher purpose

Positive psychologists believe that 40% of our happiness is under voluntary control. This means we can actually train ourselves to be happier through our daily activities and by adopting an optimistic outlook.

History

Positive Psychology is the science of the positive aspects of human life such as happiness and wellbeing, and was co-founded by Martin Seligman in the late 1990s. Psychology had traditionally focused on reducing suffering and curing mental illness, but positive psychologists noted that the absence of depression was not the same as the pres-

ence of happiness. They wanted to shift the emphasis away from what's ailing you and instead look at where you want to get to. In other words, what you focus on is what you get.

The coach



Miriam Akhtar

www.positivepsychologytraining.co.uk

"I work with clients in a treatment room or very often on the phone. Usually six coaching sessions spread over about three months is a good amount of time so we can track progress. I see all different kinds of people, although they all tend to be highly motivated. The majority are women in mid-life, often at a crossroads in life.

We start off looking at where people are in their lives now and finding out what works best for them to cultivate positive emotions. We then focus on identifying and developing their strengths. Using our strengths is one of the most reliable ways of building happiness and reducing the symptoms of depression. We all have natural talents, but so many of the people I see find it really hard to recognise their strengths; I think that's quite a British thing. We also tackle pessimistic thinking, which puts people on a fast track to depression. I've witnessed some amazing transformations and one of the most rewarding parts is seeing these huge, catastrophically negative beliefs cut down to size.

My own strengths are curiosity and emotional intelligence, so working one-to-one with people is perfect for me. I love it."

The client

Anon

"I've been through every kind of therapy there is and none of them seemed quite right. For me, talking endlessly doesn't seem to help. I thought this might be more proactive, which really appealed to me.

In the early sessions we explored positive emotions and talked about savouring the joys of life. I had to think back to a really happy memory and then forward to something I was relishing in the future. It was good, although it took me ages to think of examples and then I was worried I'd picked the wrong ones. I also had to do a test to work out my strengths,

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and surprisingly what came out on top for me was curiosity. I suppose that makes sense, although I'd never thought of it as a strength before.

One thing I didn't expect was just how much I'd have to practise the techniques outside the sessions, which is easier some days than others. They gave me a good tip, which was to do a bit of exercise beforehand to get my endorphins going and it does seem to help, even if it's just a walk to the end of the road and back. I've definitely found it a positive experience and especially in boosting my confidence, but I think I need a lot more time and practice before I get the best out of it."

The Positive Psychology toolkit for happiness:

- savouring the positive
- practising gratitude
- developing our strengths
- cultivating connections
- taking care of body and soul

Try it yourself

Each day jot down three good things that happened

These can be things you feel good about or are grateful for. Don't forget to write down why these things were good. We often ask what went wrong but rarely consider what went right. Don't worry if you miss a day; just pick it up the next.

Write a letter of gratitude

Do you have a friend, teacher, colleague or parent who's had a positive impact on you? Send them a letter letting them know specifically what you're grateful for and how it's helped make you the person you are today. Even better, visit them and read it to them in person; it'll make their day and yours.

Random acts of kindness

We get as much out of giving kindness as we do in receiving it. Try holding the door open for someone, giving up your seat on the train, tell someone when they're doing a good job or give directions to someone

who's lost. It's the little things that make a difference.

Get connected

The top 10% of happy people have close relationships and active social lives. Phone or meet with a friend and take the time to really listen to them.

Test your strengths

Click on www.authentic-happiness.sas.upenn.edu and complete the free questionnaires to discover your strengths.

Meditate

Mindfulness encourages us to stay in the moment, focussing on what we're experiencing in the here and now.

Still struggling?

Ease off on the pressure

It takes time and practice, so go easy on yourself and be prepared to experiment.

Acceptance

Positive emotions are fleeting and transient, that's just the way they are. Instead of clinging on to them, focus on how to experience them more frequently.

Balance

We can't rid ourselves of all negative emotions. They serve a purpose and enable us to appreciate the positive when it happens.



Resources

Read:

[Positive Psychology for Depression: self help strategies for happiness](#)

By Miriam Akhtar. Due to be published February 2012. £8.99

A DA exclusive on the first Positive Psychology book specifically for depression, full of practical self help strategies for you to try at home. Available to pre order from Depression Alliance, simply send us your name and address.

Click on:

[The Happiness Challenge](#)

Download the workbook for simple, daily actions to get you started

www.bbc.co.uk/news/12263893

Listen to:

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An audio programme for practical strategies to increase happiness

www.happinesstrainingplan.com