

What this fact sheet covers:

- What is positive psychology?
- Practical strategies to increase your psychological wellbeing
- Where to get more information

What is positive psychology?

Traditionally in psychology, the focus has been on identifying and treating mental health problems such as depression. This is critically important for those facing mental illness however, it provides an incomplete picture of mental health.

Positive psychology is a relatively new branch of psychology that shifts the focus from what is clinically wrong, to the promotion of wellbeing and the creation of a satisfying life filled with meaning, pleasure, engagement, positive relationships and accomplishment.

Gable and Haidt (2005) defined positive psychology as 'the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions.'

Positive psychology is not about putting on a happy face all the time. Life can be hard, and disappointments and challenges are inevitable. However, scientific research has shown that here are some strategies and skills that allow people to navigate the challenges of life more effectively and enjoy life despite the upsets.

Practical strategies to increase your psychological wellbeing

Enhancing pleasure

Savouring

Savouring is the awareness of pleasure and of giving deliberate conscious attention to the experience of pleasure. Fred B. Bryant and Joseph Veroff of Loyola University have identified five techniques that promote savouring:

- **Sharing with others:** seek out others to share the experience and tell others how much you value the moment. This is the single strongest predictor of the level of pleasure.
- **Memory building:** take mental photographs, or even a physical souvenir of the event, and reminisce about it later with others.
- **Self-congratulation:** don't be afraid of pride; tell yourself how great you are and remember how long you have waited for this to happen.
- **Sharpening perception:** focus on certain elements and block out others, like closing your eyes and listening to the music.
- **Absorption:** allow yourself to become totally immersed and try not to think, just sense.

Avoid forming habits

Rapidly repeated indulgence in the same pleasure does not work. Neurons are wired to respond to novel events, and not to fire if the events do not provide new information. Seek out a variety of experiences and spread out pleasurable events over time. Surprise yourself or others with small presents of pleasure.

Engagement

Mindfulness

Mindlessness pervades much of human activity. We act and interact automatically, without much thinking. Mindful attention to the present moment can be developed through meditation and mindfulness based therapies. Through mindfulness we can focus our perspective and sharpen our experience of the present moment.

Nurture relationships

Your income level has a surprisingly small effect on your psychological well-being. The most fundamental finding from positive psychology is that strong personal relationships have the greatest impact on your satisfaction with life. Make sure that you invest time and energy in your friends and family.

Identify and use your strengths

Think about your personal strengths and how you might use them in your everyday life. Are you a leader, playful, fair, curious or original? Do you have a good sense of perspective? Do you love learning? Are you genuine? Are you good at teamwork? You can take an online test on Martin Seligman's website (www.authentichappiness.org) to explore your personal strengths. Cultivate and use your strengths at work, in family life and in your leisure time.

Seek out 'flow' experiences

Through his research, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi sought to understand how people felt when they most enjoyed themselves and why. He developed the concept of 'flow' which describes a state of joy, creativity and total involvement. Problems seem to disappear and there is a feeling of transcendence. 'Flow' is the way people describe their state of mind when they are doing something for its own sake. Some activities consistently produced 'flow' such as sport, games, art and hobbies. Csikszentmihalyi has identified the ingredients to creating these optimal experiences:

- the task is challenging and requires skill
- we concentrate
- there are clear goals
- we get immediate feedback
- we have deep, effortless involvement
- there is a sense of control
- our sense of self vanishes
- time stops

Csikszentmihalyi says work and family life can provide important opportunities for 'flow'. When people were in 'flow', either at work or in leisure, they reported a much more positive experience. When challenges and skills were both high, people felt happier, more cheerful, stronger and more active. They concentrated more, felt more creative and satisfied.

Finding meaning

Keep a gratitude diary

Take the time each day to write down three things that went well and why. This causes psychological well-being levels to increase in a lasting way.

Thank a mentor

Write a letter of thanks to someone to whom you owe a debt of gratitude such as a teacher or grandparent. Then visit the person and read the letter to them. People who do this are measurably happier for more than a month.

Learn to forgive

Let go of anger and resentment by writing a letter of forgiveness to a person who has wronged you. Inability to forgive is associated with persistent rumination.

Weigh up your life

Take time out occasionally to consider how you are going in the major facets of your life such as family, work, finances, health and play. Reflect on the progress you are making in working towards your major life goals. Make changes in your life to match your priorities.

Perform small acts of kindness

Performing five kind acts a week, especially all in one day, creates a measurable boost to levels of psychological well-being. Giving not only makes you feel good about yourself, it enhances your connection with others and can bring you positive feedback from others.

These and other strategies are detailed in Martin Seligman's book *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*.

Where to get further information

Books

Positive Psychology

- Lyubomirsky, S (2008). *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*. Penguin Putnam
- Seligman, M E P (2011). *Flourish: A New Understanding of Happiness and Wellbeing*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing

Flow

- Csikszentmihalyi M (1991). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper Perennial
- Csikszentmihalyi M (1997). *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*. Basic Books

Altruism

- Post S, Neimark J (2007). *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*. Broadway

Gratitude

- Emmons R (2007). Thanks!: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier. Houghton Mifflin

Positive Psychology — Academic resources

- Bryant F B, Veroff J (2006). Savoring: A New Model of Positive Experience. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- Gable S L, Haidt J (2005). What (and Why) Is Positive Psychology. Review of General Psychology, Vol. 9: 103-110
- Kahneman D, Diener E, Schwarz (eds) (2003). Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology. Russell Sage Foundation Publications
- Keyes C L M, Haidt J (eds) (2003). Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived. American Psychological Association
- Petersen C (2004) Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification. Oxford University Press
- Petersen C (2006). A Primer in Positive Psychology. Oxford University Press
- Snyder C R (2005) Handbook of Positive Psychology. Oxford University Press
- The Journal of Positive Psychology. Published by Routledge

Useful Websites

- Centre for Confidence and Well-being, Scotland www.centreforconfidence.co.uk
- Positive Psychology Institute, Sydney www.positivepsychologyinstitute.com.au
- The Positivity Institute www.thepositivityinstitute.com.au
- The University of Pennsylvania, Positive Psychology Centre www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu
- Time Magazine: The New Science of Happiness. www.time.com/time/2005/happiness
- Six Part BBC Series: The Science of Happiness. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/happiness_formula

This resource has been developed for Transport for NSW as at June 2019. Please go to the Black Dog Institute website for the most up to date information: www.blackdoginstitute.org.au



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