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Chapter

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is much more than positive thinking. It is the study of what makes people happy. Obviously, happy people are not going to be depressed and are less likely to feel very anxious. Certainly, even very well adjusted people will feel sad when they lose a friend, family member, or pet and they will feel anxious in dangerous situations. However, they are likely to recover from these events more quickly and easily.

Positive psychology focuses not on reducing depression and anxiety but on increasing happiness and peace. Therefore, this chapter can be helpful even if you do not suffer from depression.

In Chapter 2, we discussed moving toward relaxation rather than fighting anxiety (remember the blue monkeys). Here, we move toward happiness rather than fighting depression. One way to do this is to list gratitudes—that is, what you are grateful for. If you tend to be a negative thinker, you might find yourself focusing on what you don't like in your life rather than looking at what you have and what is good about your life. Perhaps you're not particularly negative but you take your blessings for granted. One of the many goals of positive psychology is to be more mindful of what you are grateful for in your life on a daily basis. While some negative thoughts are sure to peek through, let them be brief thoughts, and even try to see the up-side to a negative situation.

EXERCISE Smile

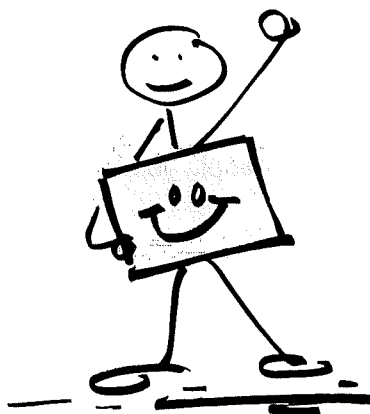
Smile, laugh, and sing more and you'll feel better about life. Sound simple? It is!

Make a big smile while noticing how it feels. Now frown. Smile again. Feel the difference?

What did you experience?

Take it a step further and laugh even though nothing is funny. How does it feel?

Put up yellow sticky notes in your home, car, and office. When you notice them, smile even if you don't feel like it.



Gratitudes

1. What are the things that you are grateful for about yourself? First, consider internal factors, such as: good sense of humor, intelligent, friendly, athletic, creative, high energy, patient, loyal, or reliable, just to name a few. In other words, what attributes do you have that you like? Put these in positive terms (e.g., "I'm smart" or "I have above-average intelligence" vs. "I'm not stupid"). Aim for 10 things, but find at least five:

If you couldn't come up with at least five, think about positive things that others have said about you, compliments you've received, or times you felt good about yourself and why. Consider asking a friend or family member what they think. Write it down even if you think it's only a bit true.

2. Now what are the external factors you like about yourself? These are physical attributes, such as: full head of hair, nice legs, pretty eyes, height, slenderness, muscularity, great eyesight, or straight teeth. If you are shy about listing these positive attributes, add compliments you've received from others. Aim for six, but find at least three:

If you couldn't come up with at least three, get help from a friend or family member.

3. Who are the people in your life you are grateful to have? Think about family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, a good therapist, a doctor, or a house cleaner. You can even be grateful for someone you had in the past who was a positive influence in your life, such as a teacher, coach, or grandparent. List as many as you can. Five is good, but aim for more than 10, even 20 if you can. (Hopefully this exercise will lead to positive emotions. If it doesn't, work on a plan to meet more people or become more connected with people you don't know well. It may be wise to see a therapist to help you with this.)

4. What is it that you like about your major roles in life (e.g., job, parent, friend, caregiver)?

5. Now think about the past 24 hours (or if it's late, you can just think about today). What are you grateful for about today? Come up with at least three things:

6. Over the next three weeks, come up with three things that you are grateful for each day. These can be constants in your life (e.g., my car, my daughter, my job, my health, my sense of humor) or they can be things that happened that day (e.g., the weather was great, I had a great laugh with my co-worker, I found a bargain on shoes). These can be things that you listed in 1-5, but do not repeat any of them over the next 21 days. Write these gratitudes on a separate piece of paper.

Mark these pages to return to them later. Read them daily, weekly, or just when you feel you'd benefit from the reminder. Consider continuing writing down three gratitudes per day on a regular basis. Or consider continuing them without writing them down (e.g., say them aloud or think of them on your commute).

If you have family dinners, consider asking each person to share their gratitudes at each evening meal.

Even though it first aired in 1951, most people have seen the Vitameatavegamin skit with Lucille Ball (“Lucy”). Lucy is hired to do a commercial for a liquid supplement called Vitameatavegamin. In the first take, she can’t hide her disgust with the taste. She then stumbles over the words and makes various mistakes. Vitameatavegamin has alcohol in it, so with each subsequent take, she gets progressively more intoxicated, and it is hilarious! If you haven’t seen it, find it online and watch it. Otherwise think of one of the funniest things that you’ve witnessed in your personal life or in a movie or TV show. As you think about this, notice your mood lifting.

EXERCISE**Favorite Funnies**

Below list three of your favorite “funnies,” whether from your own life or from TV or movies:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

When you begin to feel depressed, anxious, or irritated, bring one of these funny memories or skits to mind.

EXERCISE**Dry Bathtub**

Do you sometimes realize that your worry is a little ridiculous? Next time, consider actually getting into a dry bathtub fully clothed to match your thoughts. Worry in the tub, laugh in the tub, then, when you feel better, get out.

EXERCISE**Embellish It!**

Take your worry to a ridiculous extreme. For instance, you’re worried about being late to a party. Imagine that when you walk in there’s a dead silence. Everyone stares at you. Then they start laughing and talk about your most embarrassing moments. The host tells you that you’re too late and you need to go home. They throw tomatoes at you on the way out. For a very creative example of taking worry to a ridiculous extreme in the film *Amélie* (2001), go to YouTube and enter “Nino is Late.”

Be Kind & Feel Better

There's a saying that when you are feeling most depressed, do something kind for someone else. Why wait until you're depressed? Choose a day to do all of the following. Write down what you did and how it made you feel.

1. Compliment at least two people on something physical—their hair, their jewelry, their clothing, etc.

2. Compliment at least two people on their positive attributes. Some examples are: "You are one of the kindest people I know," "I love your sense of humor," and "I admire your problem-solving abilities."

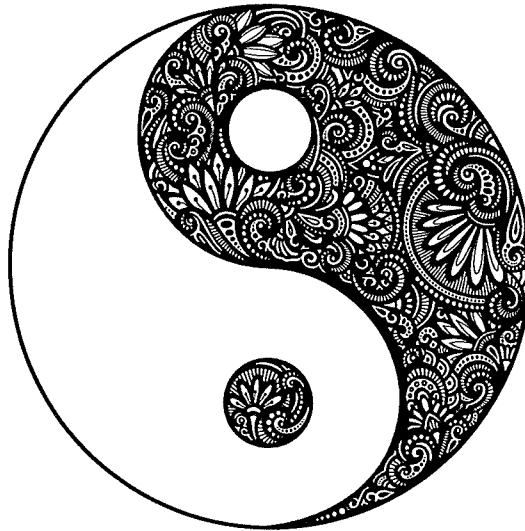
3. Do at least two kind things for at least two people. This could be as simple as opening the door for someone. It might be letting someone go in front of you in line. It could be helping a sick friend. Or it might be doing some volunteer work. Maybe it's even buying coffee for the stranger in line behind you.

4. Take the time to phone or email someone to let them know that something they did for you in the past really mattered to you.

5. Close your eyes and wish the best for yourself, for a stranger (nearby or someone in the news), for someone you love, and even for someone you don't really like.

You've probably heard someone say, "There's a yin and a yang to everything." Yin and yang are derived from ancient China and symbolize distinct but complementary forces—for instance, black and white, life and death, or good and evil. The yin is the dark side, so to speak, and the yang is the bright side. In the following worksheet, list things in your life that are currently stressful, sad, or otherwise troubling. These could be things that happened today or things that are ongoing. Once you have completed this list, write the upside, or Yang for each Yin. Some examples are:

Yin	Yang
Traffic was unusually bad today.	The sunset was gorgeous. I got a chance to listen to some great music.
My daughter's teacher was inappropriate.	I'm glad my daughter and I have the kind of relationship that she was able to tell me about it.
Strep throat is painful.	It's good to not have to work for a change. I'm enjoying the movies.
I'm so sad that my uncle died.	He lived a long, happy life. I'm grateful we were close.
My roof is leaking.	I'm lucky to have a home. I'm glad insurance will cover most of it.
I'm scared of the political climate.	I've bonded with friends with similar views. I haven't been directly affected yet.



Yin and Yang

For each troubling situation in your life today or ongoing (yin), list one to three related upsides or things for which you're grateful (yang).

Yin	Yang

EXERCISE

Rain and Sunshine

Think for a moment about rain and sunshine. It's a fact that the happiest people are not people who have lived easy lives. The happiest are people who have lived through adversity. Some of this may be because we learn then what is most important. Living through adversity certainly can make us stronger. Finally, we appreciate the good times much more when we've been through bad times. We all enjoy a warm, sunny day much more if it was preceded by five rainy, cold, cloudy days than if it was preceded by 10 days of sunshine.

When you are going through tough times, remind yourself that there will be better times ahead. While you are going through good times, be present and enjoy them. While it's okay to know that there will certainly be some tough times ahead, so that you're not too frustrated, know that those tough times will be temporary too.