

Positive Psychology: Interventions and Activities

**Taken from Training: Overcoming Disabling Thoughts Special Focus: Applying Positive Psychology;
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1) Identifying Character Strengths

- This is a cornerstone of the positive psychology movement – capitalize on what you’re good at. Stop obsessing on what you think you are bad at, and focus on what you are good at.
- Although we are naturally predisposed to a **negativity bias** (focusing on our shortcomings), doing so leaves us with a significant cost – failing to pay attention to, identify, and build on what works in your life
- Strengths are defined as a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is authentic and energizing, and enables optimal functioning, development, and performance
 - Researchers have identified 6 virtues and 24 specific strengths
 - Examples: creativity, love of learning, forgiveness, honesty, appreciation of beauty, prudence, and curiosity
 - Examples of how to put them into practice in daily life.
 - Love of learning. Set aside some free time to learn a new skill or about a new topic
 - Appreciation of beauty. Go for a hike this weekend. Take photographs and share them with friends. Try to convey your enthusiasm for what you’re showing them.
 - Creativity: on a big project work, volunteer to do the brainstorming or marketing part of the project, to help put your creative strength into practice.
 - Optimism: in a conversation with a frustrated friend, point out the upside to her situation, or how it is likely to work out for the best, even if she doesn’t see it right now.
- Acting on your strengths should feel natural and very positive. This is about being “You at your best.”
- Take the VIA Signature Strengths test for yourself. Find it at www.authentichappiness.org. Learn your strengths and put them into practice.

2) Counting your blessings/three good things

- One version of a gratitude activity: *Write down three things that went well today and why they went well.*
- Another version: *List three things in your life that you are grateful for.*
- Another version: **Gratitude letter or visit**

- An application of the “count your blessings” activity with an interpersonal component
- Abbreviated instructions: *Write a letter to someone to whom you feel grateful but never properly thanked. Write this person a letter of gratitude. Deliver the letter, preferably in person.*
- Pay a gratitude visit to someone they had never properly thanked, and read them their gratitude letter.
- Why do these work?
 - We adapt to the constant things around us, both positive and negative. Sometimes, the things we list in this activity are positive things that fade into the background of our everyday lives (family, friends, nature, and our innate abilities). These activities bring them back into focus.
 - It can validate your life goals and choices
- Correlations of Gratitude
 - High levels of gratitude are correlated to:
 - Life Satisfaction
 - Happiness
 - Optimism
 - Volunteering more
 - Low levels of gratitude correlated to:
 - Anxiety
 - Depression
 - Volunteering less
 - Envy
- Happiness-what is it?
 - A subjective state of well-being
 - A skill that can be developed
 - Positive moods are frequent and negative moods are infrequent
 - Not about changing circumstances, but perceptions of circumstances
 - Produces high levels of life satisfaction
 - 50% genetics, 10% circumstances, 40% Intentional Activity

3) Visualizing and articulating your best possible self

- Envisioning and focus on a positive future has also been shown to be very effective
 - Abbreviated instructions: *Think about your best possible self means that you imagine yourself in the future, after everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your life goals. Think of this as the realization of your life dreams, and of your own best potentials.*
 - Build Optimism:

- *What has gone well in your life? Make a list now.*
 - *Imagine how and why things can go well in the future. Make a list now.*
 - *Identify and challenge the triggers of pessimistic thoughts.*
- Psychologist Laura King has found that spending **20 minutes a day** doing a more in depth version of this activity created a *significant increase in mood*
- Researchers Ken Sheldon and Sonja Lyubomirsky adapted this activity and found that when done **regularly over four weeks**, it also led to a *consistent, sustained, and significant increase in mood*
- Why does it work?
 - Encourages optimism and self-esteem, because you are imagining achieving your most cherished future goals.
 - Thinking about longer-term goals helps you cope with setbacks along the way
 - Helps you take stock of and solidify what you most want out of life.
 - To help you structure your future and how you might get where you want to go in life. May be helpful if you are faced with a difficult life decision.

4) Setting meaningful goals

- Abbreviated instructions: *Please think about the goals that are currently important to you or have been important in your life recently. Make a list of them/Write them down.*
- Complete the Valued Living Questionnaire: *Are you living out the values you hold dear in your core self? If yes, you are more likely to have a positive outlook on yourself and your life, and less likely to experience depression and anxiety.*
- Why does it work?
 - Goals give purpose and structure to our lives.
 - Goals give us a sense of identity and self-esteem
 - Goal pursuit can serve as a coping mechanism, giving you something to throw yourself into when one area of your life isn't going so well.
 - Striving to achieve your goals may create new social bonds and connections that wouldn't have existed otherwise.
 - People who tend to pursue goals are happier, healthier, and less anxious
 - Helpful if you break big, abstract goals into small, more concrete sub-goals. It's more likely you'll achieve the end goal if it's broken down into a clear course of action

5) Focusing on interpersonal relationships

- Much research has established the importance of social support and solid interpersonal relationships as being critical to lasting happiness and well-being. You need to make relationships a priority
- Strengthen relationships

- Forgiveness
- Vulnerability
- Authenticity
- Empathy
- Quality
 - Who is fun, supportive, inspiring to you
 - Communicate face to face more frequently and be engaged/not distracted
- Why are they so beneficial?
 - We are inherently social. It's hard-wired in us.
 - Other people can be a buffer in times of trouble.
 - They remove self-focus.
 - Encourage you to have multiple roles in your life.
 - The need for belonging is thought of as one of the fundamental human needs
- Here are 2 suggestions for enhancing relationships:
 - **Prosocial behavior – Do nice things for others**
 - Abbreviated instructions: *Perform five acts of kindness this week and vary them as much as you want. Choose one day during the week (e.g., a Monday or a Saturday) in which to do all five kind acts. The acts do not need to be for the same person, and the act may or may not be similar to the acts listed above.* (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006)
 - Why does it work?
 - Changes your self-image – “I am a kind/helpful/useful person”
 - Removes self-focus – you're focusing on others
 - Can put your problems in perspective
 - You often get positive feedback from the recipients
 - Helps to strength relationships
 - Can foster social or community engagement
 - People don't always realize how beneficial this may be! Can be hard to get started, especially for those with anxiety problems
- **Capitalization**
 - There is lots of research on how to deal with negative issues and emotions in relationships.
 - For Example: *Reflect on how you respond to people when they give you good news?*
 - Your partner receives a big promotion at work and happily shares the news with you. Possible responses:
 - Passive/destructive – “*Did you run by the store on your way home?*”
 - Active/destructive – “*I guess you're going to be home even LESS from now on*”

- Passive/constructive – *“Good news. You deserve it”*
- Active-constructive – *“That’s great! I’m so proud of you! I know how hard you worked for this and you really deserve it. How did it happen? Let’s go out and celebrate”*
- Only **active-constructing** responding builds relationships:
 - More positive feelings
 - More feelings of understanding and closeness
 - More disclosure in the future
 - You need about 5 positive things in a relationship in order to offset one negative thing.

6) Finding flow

- Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as *a state that is characterized by extreme absorption and involvement in an activity that is intrinsically rewarding.*
- Flow often comes about when an activity is challenging to the point of stretching your abilities, but not so challenging that it produces anxiety.
- Flow may be experienced in a wide variety of active experiences
 - Examples: Playing sports, drawing, playing the piano, rock climbing, or having a deep conversation.
- Interestingly, flow experiences are not happy ones in the traditional sense. Actually, people are often so absorbed when they are in a flow state that they lose self-awareness. However, in retrospect, these activities are recalled as being incredibly enjoyable, and people want to repeat them.
- It is important to choose active over passive leisure.
- Reflect on what activities create flow for you and make them a priority.
- Find ways to build flow into all areas of your life, and even in the lives of your family and friends.
- Why does it work?
 - Engrossing, involving.
 - Removes self-focus
 - Because skills are being stretched, performance in an enjoyable or meaningful activity can improve.
 - We are bad at using leisure time. It’s easier to turn on the TV than to practice the guitar.

7) Savoring

- Although both promote well-being, savoring can be thought of as almost the flipside of flow.
- While a flow state is characterized by absorption that is so deep as to remove you from your own conscious awareness of yourself and your emotions, savoring can be thought of

as a process in which you engage in thoughts or behaviors that “generate, intensify, or prolong the enjoyment of positive experience” (Bryant & Veroff, 2006)

- As noted by the French writer de la Rochefoucauld (1694), “Happiness does not consist in things themselves but in the relish we have of them.”
- Being Mindful/How to Savor:
 - Abbreviated instructions: *Look around your environment and take note of one (or more!) things that you often take for granted, painting, the cup of tea you are drinking, or your cat sleeping peacefully nearby. Stop what you are doing and pay as much attention as possible to this thing. List all the pleasant qualities of this experience and the sensory experiences, thoughts, and feelings that are created inside you while you are experiencing it.*
 - It’s difficult, especially in this day and age! Requires mindful attention.
- Why does it work?
 - Like gratitude, helps us see and appreciate things we may not notice.
 - Encourages a focus on the present moment, not on past or future.

8) Finding purpose

- Research shows that those who feel that their life has some deeper meaning or purpose tend to be happier, healthier, and more committed to their goals (Steger & Frazier, 2005)
- Recall that one of the disabling thoughts mentioned early is a LACK of purpose! Without it, we can feel hopeless or like our lives lack meaning.
- Can find it through commitment to meaningful goals
- Can find their purpose through work, church, volunteering, spirituality, etc.
- Why does this work? Similar to goal pursuit.
 - Helps you structure your days
 - It gives meaning to your everyday life, helps you justify what you’re doing, helps you construct a healthy narrative about who you are and the life you live.
 - As with meaningful goal pursuit, it feels good to do things that are in accordance with your life’s purpose and values.
 - Helps you construct your identity – “I am a Christian” “I am a marathon runner.”
 - Can serve as a coping mechanism when things go poorly in your life.

9) Other Strategies:

- Meditation, reflections, Mindfulness techniques
- Take care of your body (exercise, nutrition, sleep, etc.)
- Stop comparing yourself to others
- Limit choices
- Simplify your life/Declutter your life (home, schedule, finances, etc.)
- Make small changes

How to do this:

- To put positive psychology into practice in your own life, mounting research suggests the best ways to do it:
 - Importance of “fit” – it should fit with your personality and goals. For example, extreme introverts might not feel comfortable with the gratitude visit.
 - Keep at it. Like exercise, you need to do these activities fairly often in order to see sustained benefits. It is not easy; it takes work, effort, and commitment.
 - Vary it so you don’t get used to it. For example, don’t do the same act of kindness over and over. Keep it fresh.
 - Don’t do it TOO often. A few times a week is probably good. Again, you want to keep it fresh while also making it a fairly regular habit.
 - Try to avoid focusing on happiness as an end goal. This can be counterproductive. Improving your perspective is the goal.
 - ***“Our brains are Velcro for negative information but Teflon for positive” (Rick Hanson). We need 5 positive statements or events to counter 1 negative statement or event (Losardo ratio). So start thinking positive!***