Positive Psychology
Harnessing the power of happiness, personal strength, and mindfulness

In this report:
Using the positive in your life
Quiz: How happy are you?
Getting in the “flow”
A meaningful life

SPECIAL BONUS SECTION
Mindfulness: A path to well-being
POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY
SPECIAL HEALTH REPORT

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When times are tough

Can positive psychology help you when you are anxious, depressed, or under stress? Some of the strategies of positive psychology, such as practicing gratitude, can slow your adaptation to positive events so that your feeling of happiness, when receiving a pay raise, for example, lasts instead of being immediately replaced by the desire for the next pay raise (see “Defining and measuring happiness,” page 7). Positive psychology experts suggest it may also be possible to speed your adaptation to negative events so you bounce back more rapidly after an economic downturn, health crisis, or personal loss.

Using positive psychology techniques can help you develop the resilience to handle difficulties more easily. If you develop the habit of counting your blessings, for example, you may be better able to appreciate the good in your life that remains even after a change in circumstances like a job loss or a death. Greater engagement in hobbies or nature and good relationships with family and friends can be sources of support in difficult times. In addition, knowing your strengths, another tenet of positive psychology (see “Your strengths and virtues,” page 13), can help you develop realistic goals when your life changes. And helping others, even when you are struggling, can increase your positive feelings and help you gain perspective.

Coping with stress

There is also intriguing preliminary evidence that positive psychology techniques, in addition to preparing you for the ups and downs of life, can be valuable in times of stress, grief, or other difficulties. Here are some examples:

- **Gratitude.** People dealing with an unpleasant emotional memory were given one of three writing assignments: write something neutral, write about the unpleasant event, or write about positive consequences from the event that they could be grateful for (see “Exercise 7: One door closes, one door opens,” page 32). In results published in 2008 in *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, those who focused on gratitude in their writing gained more closure on the incident, had fewer intrusive memories of the event, and had less emotionally fraught memories, compared with participants whose writing did not focus on gratitude.

  One of researcher Robert Emmons’ landmark studies on gratitude interventions, published in 2003 in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, involved people with chronic physical illness. For three weeks, patients with neuromuscular diseases kept a daily gratitude journal and completed daily rating forms about their experiences. Those counting their blessings experienced more positive feelings, optimism, life satisfaction, and connectedness with others—and the positive changes were echoed in reports that significant others kept about them. The participants benefited physically as well, sleeping longer and waking more refreshed.

- **Strengths.** In a Veterans Affairs psychiatric rehabilitation program, patients were given the opportunity to take the 240-question VIA survey (see “Your strengths and virtues,” page 13) and receive a printout of their five signature strengths. The clinicians reported in the journal *Psychiatric Services* in 2006 that participants felt pride in their discoveries, had a sense of accomplishment, and improved their mood just by taking the inventory. Later, many of the veterans referred to their lists of strengths for direction and encouragement as they engaged in therapy and made education and career plans for their futures.

- **Savoring pleasure.** Positive reminiscence is not only pleasurable, it helps people gain a new perspective on current problems. In a 2008 study from the Netherlands, when depressed older adults used the tool of positive reminiscence, they not only thought more positively about their past but began to evaluate themselves, their social relationships, and their future more positively.
Flow. When you’re fully engaged in activities, you are less preoccupied by mundane thoughts. In addition, flow experiences can lessen more disturbing thoughts. In a study published in *The British Journal of Occupational Therapy* in 2006, women living with cancer had fewer intrusive thoughts about their illness and reduced stress when they had flow experiences while creating artwork.

Meaning. In a study of patients who’ve had heart attacks, those who blamed their heart attack on others were more likely to have a second attack in the next eight years. People who perceived some benefit in their experience, such as appreciating life more, were less likely to have a recurrence.

Mindfulness. For three decades, mindfulness-based stress reduction programs (first developed at the University of Massachusetts Medical School) have helped reduce physical and psychological symptoms in people facing a variety of challenges, including cancer and chronic pain. As an example, the skin lesions of patients undergoing ultraviolet light therapy for severe psoriasis cleared more rapidly when people listened to an audiotaped mindfulness intervention during treatment sessions.

Positive psychology in psychotherapy
Ask most therapists, and you’re likely to hear that they’ve been using positive psychology for years. Many of the ideas of positive psychology have long been part of psychotherapy. Good therapists of all types help people recognize their strengths and identify paths toward greater fulfillment and happiness. For example, feminist therapy usually tries to identify women’s strengths (rather than focus on their weaknesses) and accept and validate women’s feelings. Humanistic psychology emphasizes the importance of finding meaning in life and continuing to grow psychologically. But until recently, the primary focus of a lot of psychotherapy was to treat mental illness by addressing negative patterns of thoughts and behaviors.

Acceptance-based therapies
Several new “acceptance-based” therapies explicitly use mindfulness, often combined with cognitive behavioral techniques, to help people who are depressed or anxious recognize when they are having negative thoughts (“no one likes me”) and to accept and watch them dispassionately rather than getting caught up in the negativity. Some of these therapies also stress the positive psychology approach of identifying and acting in accordance with your values.

Mindfulness-based cognitive behavioral therapy, which combines mindfulness practice with cognitive behavioral techniques, has been successfully used to treat depression and anxiety. The best documented use is to prevent relapses of depression. Mindfulness helps people recognize when their mood is beginning to plummet, and to focus on their present experience rather than on fears of the future or reliving past negative episodes. In randomized clinical trials, mindfulness-based cognitive behavioral therapy cut the relapse rate in half for people with recurrent episodes of depression. In a randomized clinical trial published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* in 2008, people with recurrent depression who participated in an eight-week group course of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy were significantly less likely to become depressed again than people who continued on antidepressants without therapy. During the study, people in the mindfulness group reported greater physical well-being and enjoyment in daily life, and 75% were able to discontinue their antidepressant medication.

Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) has become an established treatment for borderline personality disorder, a difficult-to-treat condition in which a person experiences extreme fluctuations in mood and in their opinions of themselves and others. Unable to tolerate frustration, people with borderline personality disorder often lash out, and their lives are characterized by chaotic and difficult relationships and by self-destructive behaviors such as eating disorders, cutting themselves, and suicide attempts. Mindfulness skills learned as part of DBT help patients watch their thoughts and emotions nonjudgmentally, enabling them to better tolerate distress and gain more control over their reactions. In one two-year study, patients treated with DBT had far fewer suicide attempts and psychiatric hospitalizations, and they were more likely to stick with their treatment.
**Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)** is increasingly used to treat a remarkable range of psychological difficulties. While it doesn't teach mindfulness meditation, ACT helps people to see that their thoughts are just thoughts rather than reality and to see themselves as the observer of the thoughts rather than as the “thinker.” It also helps patients to accept their constantly changing kaleidoscope of pleasant and unpleasant experiences and to redirect their lives toward whatever provides meaning. ACT has been shown to lower the need for rehospitalization of psychotic patients, lessen social anxiety, reduce disability due to pain, aid smoking cessation, and reduce high-risk adolescent sexual behavior.

**Finding assistance**

People in a broad range of professions—from traditionally trained mental health professionals to motivational speakers to religious teachers—claim they can help you become happier. Several types of practitioners with varying credentials offer services drawing on the findings of positive psychology.

**Life coaches**

Over the past several years, there has been a surge in the number of people promoting themselves as “life coaches” or “happiness coaches” who consult with people in person, via scheduled telephone sessions, or through e-mail communication. Life coaches help people evaluate their values and goals, make plans for areas they wish to change, and take concrete steps to put them into action. Life coaches do not provide treatment for depression, anxiety, or other mental disorders. No degree is required to be a life coach, and there is no licensing requirement. However, some people who practice as life coaches hold degrees and licenses in mental health fields. For example, some coaches are psychotherapists who have partially or totally shifted their practice into coaching. Recent entrants to the field include people who have earned a master’s degree in positive psychology: this training does not specifically train people as therapists or coaches, but it prepares graduates to incorporate positive psychology techniques into their existing practices.

**Licensed mental health professionals**

These practitioners come from a variety of academic disciplines but share knowledge of the causes of psychological distress and its treatment. Each field has its own strengths.

- **Psychiatrists (M.D.)** are medical doctors who have attended medical school and specialized in psychiatric disorders. These doctors are state licensed, covered by health insurance, generally prescribe medications, and may also provide psychotherapy.

- **Psychiatric clinical nurse specialists (R.N.)** have earned a degree in nursing with a specialty in providing psychiatric services. They often provide psychotherapy, are usually covered by health insurance, and may prescribe medications.

- **Psychologists (Ph.D., Psy.D., Ed.D.)** have earned a doctoral degree in psychology. They generally provide psychotherapy and may also do psychological testing. Many hold state licenses to treat patients and are covered by health insurance plans. Most psycholo-
gists do not prescribe medication. The field of positive psychology originated with and has been developed mainly by psychologists.

Clinical social workers (L.I.C.S.W.) have earned a master’s degree in social work. Many hold state licenses to treat patients and are covered by health insurance plans. They provide psychotherapy and are trained particularly to focus on a person’s place in the family or wider community. They do not prescribe medication.

States also license a variety of other master’s-level counselors with various areas of specialization.

Which should you choose?
If you feel you are generally doing well and not struggling with anxiety, depression, substance problems, or other mental health issues, but would like some support in using positive psychology in your life, a coach may be able to help. Recognize, however, that it’s a buyer-beware situation. Ask about training and experience, examine references, and schedule a trial session to evaluate the coach’s listening skills, knowledge, and compatibility before entering into any type of contract for ongoing coaching.

Most positive psychology interventions carry little risk, but they may heighten your awareness of difficulties in your life. A coach who is not a mental health professional may not be able to assist you in identifying problems that could benefit from medication or psychotherapy, nor be able to help you process strong feelings that may emerge during the process. If you feel that your thoughts, behaviors, and feelings are interfering with your ability to function well in life, or you wish to evaluate the influence that past relationships and experiences are having on your current functioning, it is probably best to seek a traditionally trained mental health professional.

If you are intrigued by the principles and strategies described in this report, ask whether the therapist’s approach incorporates aspects of positive psychology—such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy or acceptance and commitment therapy. Other questions to ask:

- What is your training and experience?
- What areas do you specialize in?
- What type of treatments do you usually use with people in my situation?
- Do you accept my insurance plan?
- What are your fees?
- How long would you anticipate seeing me before we re-evaluate how things are going?
- Can I schedule an interview or trial session prior to making a decision?
- What is your experience working with people with my concerns? 

From the body up
“Healthy body, healthy mind” is an old idea buoyed by new evidence. How you treat your physical body affects your mind and your level of happiness.

Healthy sleep and exercise habits can buoy both mind and body. For example, in a study of working women, getting a good night’s sleep made a huge difference in how much women enjoyed all types of activities during the day—far bigger than the influence of income, marital status, religion, or time pressures.

As for exercise, it turns out that many people’s lifestyles include a natural depressant: being sedentary. Humans are designed for physical activity, and physical exercise has been shown to enhance well-being and help prevent or significantly reduce anxiety and depression.

In a study published in Psychosomatic Medicine in 2007, when 202 people with major depression were randomly assigned to supervised or home exercise programs, the antidepressant sertraline (Zoloft), or a placebo, four months later the exercisers were just as likely to have entered remission as those taking medication.
Happiness, of course, isn’t a totally solo enterprise. Your relationships can have a large impact on your sense of well-being, and your actions and moods can influence the people you come in contact with. There’s also recent evidence that when you become happier, it helps those around you increase their own happiness. In the large Framingham Heart Study, when people became happy, their nearby friends experienced a 25% greater chance of becoming happy, and their next-door neighbors had a 34% increase. In their report in the December 2008 issue of BMJ, researchers from the University of California, San Diego, and Harvard Medical School concluded that “people’s happiness depends on the happiness of others with whom they are connected.” So working toward your own happiness can benefit the people around you as well.

Positive relationships

Day-to-day happiness in a relationship takes effort, and the techniques of positive psychology can be useful tools in that quest.

At the beginning of a relationship, nothing is more fascinating for two people than learning about each other and negotiating the give-and-take of getting along. Long-term relationships can grow deeper and more intimate, but without some active attention, they can also deteriorate, as people repeat the same behaviors and anticipate the same reactions from their mates.

There is some evidence that applying principles from positive psychology can enhance relationships. Engaging in flow experiences together, for example, may lead to more positive feelings for each other, according to a 2008 study, published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, that used the technique of experience sampling (see “Defining flow,” page 21). In this study, couples were beeped at random intervals and reported on their activity, mood, and satisfaction and closeness in their relationship. The researchers found that the way couples spend their time together influences the quality of their relationship. Watching television was pretty neutral, not making couples feel any better or worse about their relationship. In contrast, pursuing more flow-inviting activities as a couple—such as sailing, hiking, learning a new skill together, or other active leisure (including sex)—led to more positive feelings about the relationship, which lasted for more than five hours after the activity ended.

In a follow-up laboratory study at Western Washington University in which couples solved word puzzles together, the tasks with a flow-inviting balance of skill and challenge (the couple could successfully complete them, but it took work) made the couples feel better about their relationships than working on a puzzle that was too easy or too hard.

Mindfulness has also been linked to happier, more resilient relationships. In the Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, researchers at the University of Rochester reported in 2007 that higher levels of mindfulness, as measured by people’s self-ratings on 15 statements related to being focused in the present, are linked to more satisfactory relationships and to a greater capacity to respond to conflicts constructively, with less stress and better communication.

Gratitude can also improve relationship satisfaction. Researchers at Harvard and other universities found a unique way to boost gratitude among people in long-term relationships. Researchers at Harvard and other universities found a unique way to boost gratitude among people in long-term relationships.

Taking positive psychology beyond the individual

Researchers at Harvard and other universities found a unique way to boost gratitude among people in long-term relationships.
partner, never have started dating, and not have ended up together. Those who contemplated not being with their partners showed the biggest gains in relationship satisfaction, the researchers reported in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 2008.

Relationships are a perfect place to introduce more expressions of gratitude, appreciation, and kindness. You and your partner can support each other in your quest for a happy, meaningful life.

**Positive communities**

When the American Psychological Association first adopted a focus on positive psychology, it explicitly included the study of how institutions such as schools, employers, and providers of medical care and social services can encourage people to live happier, more meaningful lives—both for the benefit of individuals and for the improved functioning of the larger organizations. A few examples follow:

- **The workplace.** In 2002, the Corporate Leadership Council compiled a survey of almost 20,000 employees at 34 companies. Their findings showed a dramatic link between job performance and attention to strengths: when performance reviews emphasized what a person was doing right in the job, it led to a 36% improvement in performance, while emphasizing performance weaknesses led to a 27% decline in performance.

  Matching employees with the right incentives can also improve performance and job satisfaction, according to a 2005 study reported in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. The researchers looked at what made employees in an electronics and appliance store happier. For employees who were intrinsically achievement-oriented, creating opportunities for flow through the combination of high skill and high challenge in work activities improved employees’ mood, kept them interested in their work, and inspired them to go beyond their basic job requirements to help co-workers and the organization. For employees with a low need for achievement, greater satisfaction at work might be better obtained by offering them greater autonomy, more free time, or more opportunities for camaraderie with co-workers (as well as higher pay!).

- **Health care.** Some clinicians have already embraced the concepts of positive psychology as a preventive health strategy. Case managers working to ensure that people get the medical and mental health services they need have adopted a strengths-based approach that helps patients appreciate their own strengths and assume more control over decisions about their care. As an example, when people with recently diagnosed HIV infection met with a case manager who helped them identify their personal strengths and abilities and formulate a plan to get the help they needed, they were significantly more likely to get appropriate medical care.

- **Education.** Positive psychology offers many possibilities for using the concept of flow to adapt assignments so that each child is engaged and challenged. Identifying and building strengths can help in assessment, individualizing teaching methods, and counseling about careers. In an ongoing controlled trial funded through the U.S. Department of Education, some ninth graders in Pennsylvania have their language-arts classes supplemented by a positive psychology curriculum that involves literature discussions and writing assignments. Students are being tracked through graduation to see if the intervention changes their grades, extracurricular activities, levels of satisfaction, self-assessment of their character strengths, and the occurrence of depression and anxiety. Should these positive psychology interventions prove effective, such techniques could play a future role in reaching educational goals for children and adults alike.