A practical guide to Positive Psychology

LEARN TO ENHANCE YOUR OWN SENSE OF HAPPINESS
How to be **truly happy** is undoubtedly among the greatest dilemma of all time.

Since ancient Greeks, the pursuit of happiness and the desire to lead a fulfilled life have been the **driving forces** behind human beings.

Nevertheless, it is only in the 21st century, after years of psychology largely investigating what caused unhappy people to be unhappy, that scientists started posing a **new question**:

**“WHAT MAKES HAPPY PEOPLE HAPPY?”**

This concept is at the heart of **positive psychology** and can play a crucial role in our mental well-being.
What is positive psychology?

Positive psychology is the scientific study of what makes life most worth living.
- Peterson, 2008

Positive psychology is the science of life’s positive qualities: well-being, happiness, satisfaction, and fulfilment. The approach explores human thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, with a focus on strengths instead of weaknesses.

The term, originally coined by the psychologist Abraham Maslow, was actually popularized by Martin Seligman in 2002 through his influential work “Authentic Happiness”. He proposed a new subfield of psychology with a focus on what is life-giving rather than life-depleting and highlighted three essential aims of psychology to the overall study of happiness:
“The first is that psychology should be just as concerned with human strength as it is with weakness. It should be interested in the best things in life. And it should be just as concerned with making the lives of normal people fulfilling, and with genius, with nurturing high talent.”
- Martin Seligman, TED Talk

Seligman’s approach has been picked up by many researchers around the world and has provided a foundation for the application of positive principles in multiple areas.

IN A NUTSHELL

The aim of positive psychology is to make normal life more fulfilling, by asking the question “What is right with you?”. It focuses on positive events and influences such as happiness, optimism, compassion, gratitude, and joy. Nevertheless, managing positive emotions is not all it is about. Positive psychology in fact offers much more beyond that.
Positive psychology changes the colours of the glasses through which we see life. **Good things happen. Bad things happen.** There’s a lot going on in the world over which we have little to no control. What you can control is how you perceive these good and bad things. Let’s go through a practical example:

**Hands on:**

You are on your way to Disneyland with the family. You suddenly blow a tire. You have to wait for help and after 1.5 hours, you can get back on the road and finally arrive at your destination.

**Problem-focused response:**

- "Why did this happen to us? Now we missed 1.5 hours at Disneyland!"
- "Stupid me, I should've checked the car before travelling..."

**Positivity-focused response:**

- "Luckily someone could come and help us out! We still got a lot of time at Disneyland!"
- Fill in your positive thoughts...
Let’s go through some theory

As a field, positive psychology touches upon many fundamental facets of life, such as character strengths, self-esteem, relationships, well-being and how each of these can be applied and used to reach meaning and purpose.

The ultimate goal is to increase happiness and well-being by enabling individuals and communities to flourish. To achieve this, a number of elements should be considered. Dr Seligman expanded his vision of human well-being based on five pillars, known by the acronym PERMA. Let’s explore each of them in detail.

P — Positive emotions

Experiencing positive emotions has a major impact on boosting our well-being.

We can cultivate positive emotions in many different ways: e.g., through gratitude and forgiveness, by enjoying ourselves in the moment and by building hope and optimism for the future.
**E - Engagement:**

Have you ever lost track of time and become completely absorbed in something you enjoy and excel at? Well, this is what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a leading figure in the field of positive psychology, calls “flow”. To enhance our well-being, it is important to develop this sense of engagement. There are many activities in which flow can be experienced, such as good conversations, work tasks, playing a musical instrument, reading a book, writing, or simply practising sports.

**R - Relationships**

It is no news that relationships are vital to our well-being. We are social creatures, and it is thanks to our meaningful connections with others that we truly flourish. Think about it: all the experiences we live are often amplified through our relationships - joy, laughter, accomplishment, belonging. Connections with others can give us purpose and are one of the best antidotes to “the downs” of life.
M - Meaning:

A sense of meaning is thought to be the highest form of happiness. This is the feeling we get when serving something bigger than ourselves or when we use our skills and strengths for something beyond our own self. Many institutions help enable a sense of meaning, such as work organisations, justice, community, and social causes (e.g., environment), to name just a few.

A - Accomplishment

We all flourish when we are succeeding, reaching our objectives, and improving ourselves. According to Seligman “without a drive to accomplish and achieve, we are missing one of the puzzle pieces of authentic well-being.”
The PERMA model provides a thorough framework for understanding and enhancing our well-being. To feel well, each element of these five should be considered equally important. Happiness cannot only be built on amplifying positive emotions or living a life of engagement. Naturally, they play an important role, but will not be enough to develop a comprehensive sense of well-being which includes also meaning, success and positive relationships.

A LITTLE RECAP

- Try to focus more on positive emotions: engage in more activities that make you happy and add enjoyment to your everyday routine;

- Strive to increase your engagement: strengthen your talents, engage in hobbies you are interested in, and hunt for experiences in line with your passions;

- Enhance the quality of the relationships you have with people: strive to create stronger, more enduring bonds with your friends, family, and loved ones.

- Look for meaning in your life: many activities among which volunteering, helping others and developing personal interests can guide you towards finding your purpose.

- Never give up working toward your achievements - keep striving for your higher aspirations! But always remember to give yourself a break. Healthy balance is key!
How does positive psychology make our life better?

Positive psychology has a key role in guiding us towards a more optimistic view to improve our quality of life.

We know that this is more easily said than done. It often feels easier to focus on the negative outcomes and complain about what is going wrong in our life. It is important to remark that the field of positive psychology does not deny the existence of flaws and struggles, nor is intended to discredit the importance of studying how things go wrong. Instead, it argues that equal consideration should be given to the positive aspects and that building strength should be regarded as important as repairing damages.

The potential benefits of applying positive psychology are endless: an increase in self-esteem, improved relationships, and a greater outlook on life are just some of them. Discovering what leads people to live more meaningful lives can also translate to better strategies for managing mental struggles and correcting negative behaviours. This new perspective can ultimately create the conditions for a generally happier and more fulfilled life.
How to apply it in everyday life?

Many of the techniques to apply positive psychology in your everyday life can be put into practice immediately, for example, random acts of kindness and gratitude. The best part? These skills may boost your mood pretty quickly too!

Here we list five principles and exercises of positive psychology that can be applied in different settings and how you can benefit from them:

1. **Gratitude**

Gratitude is one of the most well-known positive psychology approaches and it's no wonder: it feels good to be grateful! According to research, gratitude also has a number of other benefits, including emotional and physical effects (e.g., better sleep, less stress and improved emotional awareness). It appears clear that the simple act of giving thanks can have a significant effect on a person’s well-being.

While we all know the benefits of keeping a gratitude journal (if you haven’t yet, check out our Journaling Handbook!), these are not the only means to lead a more grateful life. There are plenty of other ways to benefit from the power of gratitude. Some suggestions?

- Every week, commit to a complaint-free day
- Take a gratitude walk
- Share the best part of your day around the dinner table
- Use gratitude affirmations during your meditation
Think about someone whom you appreciate. They could be a friend, a partner, a family member, a teacher, or a colleague. Pick anyone who has had an impact on your life and whom you would like to thank. Write a letter that tells them why you appreciate them and why are you grateful to have them in your life. It's up to you if you'd like to share the letter or not.

Dear...

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

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____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________
Self-compassion

Same old story: we can be incredibly hard on ourselves. We often become our own harshest judges, criticising and pointing out every minor flaw. This attitude, however, not only harms our self-esteem and self-confidence, but also drives us to focus on the negatives, affecting our mood and interfering with our ability to enjoy the good in our lives. Guess what? **Self-compassion here is the best cure.** When we treat ourselves with kindness and patience, we are acknowledging our imperfections and showing ourselves love, no matter what.

How to get there?

- Treat yourself as you would treat a friend: ask yourself how you would be with a loved one in a similar situation. Imagine what you would say to that person, now say that to yourself. Be your own cheerleader!

- Practice **positive talk** and give yourself encouragement;

- Try **self-compassion mindfulness** - check out a quick exercise here;

- Cultivate kindness: work on doing one kind act every week;
Think of something that has recently caused you to be hard on yourself.

Now place 3 empty chairs in front of you. Each chair represents a different perspective to help you understand your self-criticism. The exercise consists in playing the role of each voice represented by the respective chairs.

The first chair represents your inner critic. Sit on this chair and express out loud the thoughts you have been ruminating upon. What would those be? What tone would you use to speak to yourself?

The second chair represents the emotionality or sensation of feeling judged. How would you describe this? How does it make you feel to encounter criticism?

The third chair takes the perspective of a supportive friend or counsellor. Confront both the critical voice from chair 1 and the critiqued voice from chair 2. Address both perspectives. What would you say? What advice do you give? How do you relate to each perspective from an external point of view?
3 Strength spotting

The happiest people are those that have found their unique strengths and qualities and make use of them in every possible scenario. Perhaps you are kind, perseverant, fair, or creative. How often do you see yourself under this light? Finding and using our strengths, not only enriches our personal life but also serves as a reminder of how valuable we are.

Hands on:

Step 1. Below is a list of virtues that are similar across multiple cultures and religions. Circle the strengths that you already possess - write down an example of these strengths and how you are using them in your daily life.
### Hands on:

**Step 2.** For the next week, write a brief plan for using your chosen strengths.

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<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Plan</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>Bring coffee to a colleague</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>After dinner, have a walk in a new area of town</td>
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**Example** Fill in yours

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Flow can be experienced through activities that we love doing, such as practising sports, painting, and playing music. The key is to feel in control and receive immediate feedback while having the awareness that there is much room for growth. In order for a flow state to happen and reach that 'loss of self-consciousness' moment, the activity you are performing should be **voluntary** and **motivating**, it must **require skill** and be **challenging** enough to spur you.

**Some tips?**

- Keep challenging your **comfort zone**;
- Think **outside the box**: you have no limits in your imagination!
- Immerse yourself in **new experiences**, environments, and connections;
What did you do as a kid that made you lose track of time? What about it motivated/inspired you? How can you find this in further activities today? This exercise will help you measure your flow.
5 Visualize success

Visualization is a simple technique that can help us to create a strong mental image of future events. As most often our goals are future-oriented, mentally picturing success for what we wish to achieve is a powerful tool to think positively and reinforce our confidence. "Seeing" ourselves succeed - even if initially only in our mind - helps us believe that it can actually happen.

When we imagine every step of an event going in the right way, we prepare mentally and physically to take those steps in real life.
What would your life look like in a perfect future?
Imagine yourself in the future achieving your best possible outcome. Visualize your professional growth, personal goals and your social relationships in a future where all has been possible and you have accomplished everything that you wished for.
How would your best possible self be?
As humans, we need to thrive and cultivate the best version of ourselves to truly bloom and grow. There are many different routes to a flourishing life. As it is vital to work on our weaknesses, so is focusing on personal strengths to achieve a healthy balance between the two.

Through the principles of positive psychology, we can learn to build on those skills and grow our capacities for love, compassion, self-worth, creativity, resilience, and integrity which are essential to achieve a meaningful life.
HAPPINESS IS A JOURNEY, NOT A DESTINATION AND IT IS TO BE FOUND ALONG THE WAY.

For more tips and exercises from our psychologist, check out our blog posts and handbooks.

Would you like some extra help in your journey?

Book a consultation