

7 WAYS TO APPLY PSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Overview

2 December 2014

We all want to live happier, more engaging and more meaningful lives.

The science of positive psychology contributes new insights and proven strategies to increase wellbeing in individuals, workplaces and communities.

Positive psychology has changed the course of mainstream psychology. After years classifying and repairing the worst of human experience, positive psychology emerged to build on the best. Spearheaded by Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in 1998, positive psychology focused attention on exploring and expanding what makes life worthwhile, productive and fulfilling, in all its complexity.

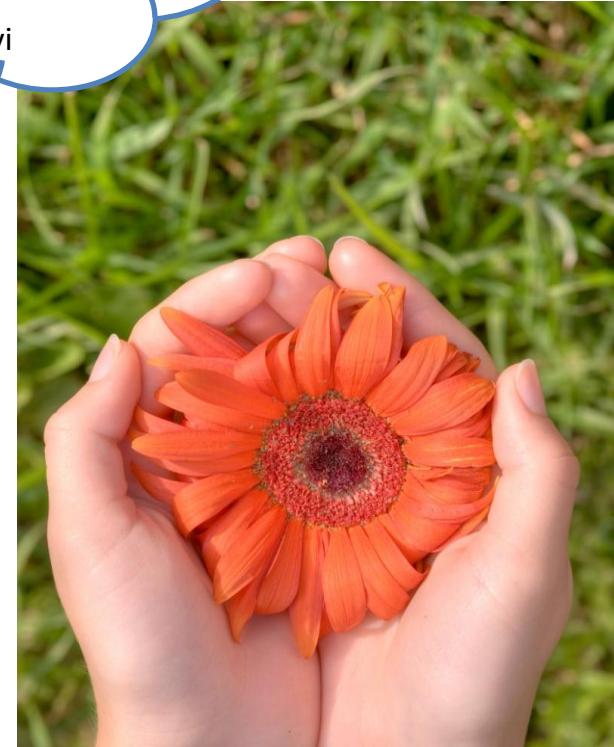
This rich and varied field now spans many areas, building on philosophies and practices from Aristotle to Maslow and providing new evidence to help us better understand why and how people flourish.

“[Positive Psychology is] the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels.”

Martin Seligman &
Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

A meta-study by leading positive psychologists Sonja Lyubomirsky, Laura King and Ed Diener brought together over 200 studies conducted on 275,000 people worldwide. They found that happiness leads to success in nearly every life domain, from health and longevity to workplace performance, creativity and relationships.

This eBook introduces you to some of the most practical and research-backed ways to apply positive psychology to increase happiness, wellbeing and effectiveness—in your life, at work, at home and with the people you care for, help and lead.





POSITIVE EMOTION

Positive emotions are one of the hallmarks of happiness and wellbeing. When we feel good, we are more able to perform at our best. Positive psychology researcher and emotional intelligence expert Sue Langley explains that positive emotions allow us to think more flexibly and creatively. “We come up with more ideas and they tend to be better quality,” she says.

They also make us more willing to try new strategies and reach out to others, according to Barbara Fredrickson, who developed the Broaden and Build Theory. The psychological and social resources we build when we experience positive emotions buffer life’s challenges, keep us optimistic and curious about the future, and propel us in an upward spiral of happiness and wellbeing.

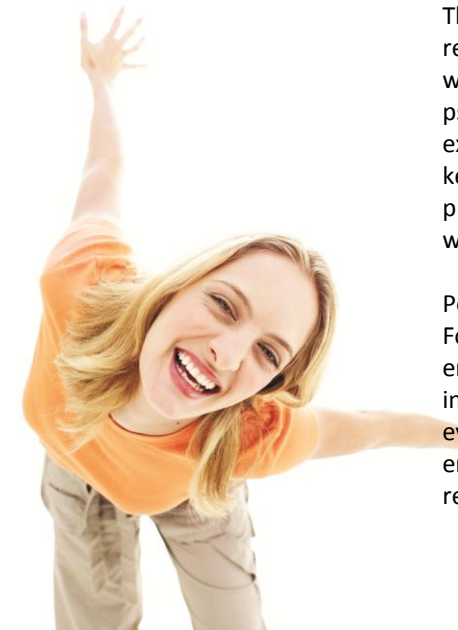
Positive emotions act as a reset to negative emotion. Focus on increasing the duration and intensity of your emotional peaks and shortening the duration and intensity of your lows, advises Sue Langley. Do this in every domain of your life. Bringing more positive emotions into your day will help you develop the resources and skills to be more successful and resilient.

High-energy emotions like excitement, zest and enthusiasm shift our mood and our physiology fast. Laughter is one of the quickest ways you can activate the healing effect of positive emotion. Just a few minutes of laughter a day can reduce stress and improve your heart rate, muscle activity, digestion and immune system.

Maximise fun moments to feel happier and healthier. Better still, share them with others to create an upward spiral that sustains everyone.

“Positivity transforms us for the better. By opening our hearts and minds positive emotions allow us to discover and build new skills, new ties, new knowledge and new ways of being.”

Barbara Fredrickson





MINDSET

Our attitude influences the way we respond, our impact on others and our happiness level. The more we recognise our power to make conscious positive choices, the more difference we can make to our own and other people's wellbeing.

The attitudes that make up our mindset aren't as set as we think, according to Carol Dweck, a Stanford University professor who discovered the concept of Growth Mindset.

People with a Fixed Mindset believe their basic qualities, like intelligence or talent, are static traits, and so don't spend time developing them. People with a Growth Mindset see themselves as a work in progress. They believe they can nurture their abilities through dedication and hard work. Their love of learning makes them more resilient and successful. Adopting a growth mindset and the positive mental attitude that goes with it makes you more motivated, productive and happier.

Emphasise what you are learning each time you try something new. Focus on the progress you are making toward a goal, rather than what will happen if you don't get there. Challenge your own assumptions: Are you making judgements based on predetermined attitudes that limit you?

"I change myself, I change my world."

M. K Ghandi



So how much potential do we have to change if we set our minds to it? Research by Sonja Lyubomirsky and her colleagues and their concept of a Happiness Pie gives us a clue.

They discovered that about 50% of the differences between people's happiness levels can be explained by genetically determined set points. Just like genes for intelligence and cholesterol, the set point you inherit has a big influence on how happy you will be. A further 10% is linked to your circumstances. Whether you are rich or poor, married or divorced, healthy or unhealthy, environmental factors account for an additional portion of your happiness overall.

The remaining 40% is influenced by intentional activities. Some of these activities can also improve your circumstances. This means we can increase or decrease almost half of our happiness level through our choices and mindset.

The tools and activities in this ebook are designed to widen your options and increase your capacity for wellbeing. You can learn more by [studying positive psychology](#) or reading some of the [books by leading researchers](#).



MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness involves single pointedly resting our awareness in one place for an extended period without being distracted.

Ellen Langer, a mindfulness expert and early researcher in positive psychology, defines mindfulness as “the process of actively noticing new things.” She believes it’s the opposite of mindlessness, drawing us into the present. “It’s the essence of engagement. And it’s energy-begetting, not energy-consuming.”

When we approach the world with mindful awareness we can more accurately assess and respond to situations and people. By noticing and separating ourselves from old beliefs and anxieties we become more accepting of ourselves and others.

A mindful state has three qualities, according to Mel Neil, a mindfulness practitioner, practicing Buddhist and senior trainer of the Langley Group Institute’s [Diploma of Positive Psychology and Wellbeing](#):

Relaxation – settling the body in its natural state

Stillness – avoiding movement to quiet the mind

Vigilance – careful, focused attention on the mind itself moment by moment.

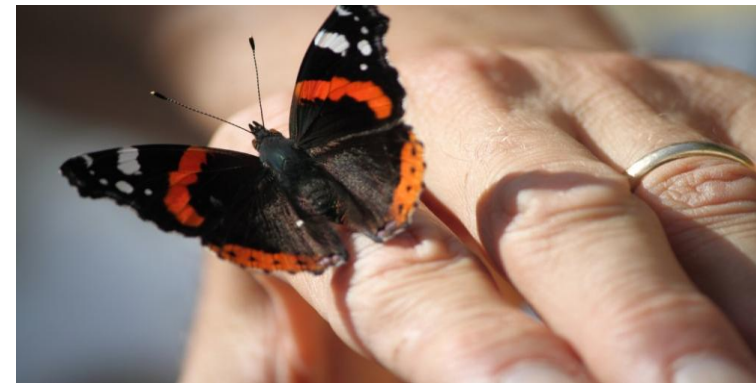
"Normally our attention wanders, oscillating between excitation and dullness," she explains. "Only when we attempt for the first time to direct and hold our attention in a single place for even a few moments do we become vividly aware of just how chaotic our minds really are. Mindfulness is the ability to rest our awareness without it falling under the influence of either excitation or dullness."

“Mental activities like meditation can actually change the brain.”

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

It is possible to train the mind to become more still and focused. It’s a skill that takes time to learn and discipline to practice, yet it does not take long to make significant progress and the benefits are immediate. While there are many mindfulness practices we can learn and master, such as meditation and yoga, its not that hard to include mindfulness in our own day-to-day, routine-filled lifestyles.

We just need to notice what’s going on and savour our experiences with attention and awareness.



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RESILIENCE

Resilience is the capacity to withstand and adapt to the challenges life throws us. It is a skill anyone can learn, to survive and to thrive. Resilient people fulfill their potential despite, even because of, adversity, and tend to see challenges as opportunities for growth and renewal.

Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatte identify four ways people use resilience: to overcome the difficult circumstances or negative consequences of childhood, to steer through daily stressors, to bounce back from setbacks, and to reach out to pursue new goals and a stronger sense of self. Reaching out allows us to move past our urge to protect ourselves and open up to new experiences and challenges.

Resilience can be practiced through any strategy that helps you manage your emotions or dispute negative thoughts, advises Sue Langley. She recommends cultivating a range of tactics.

“Brain science shows us that our emotions, brain and body are intricately linked. We can change the way we feel by adjusting how we think or hold our body.”

For example, exercise or deep breathing techniques will help you get oxygen to your body and brain and shift your emotional state. Get out into nature or change your environment when you are feeling stressed. Even a simple action like tidying your desk can create enough space to adjust and choose the best way to respond to situations rather than letting our emotional reactions dictate our behaviour.

“If we don’t allow ourselves to experience joy and love, we will definitely miss out on filling our reservoir with what we need when...hard things happen.”

Brené Brown

As we’ve seen, positive emotions enhance our social resources. The more laughter, love and good feelings we experience and share with family, colleagues and friends, the more we expand our ability to shift negative emotions and bounce back. That’s one reason why studies show that positive, loving relationships early in life are the strongest predictor of later success.

Give someone you care about a hug. Smile at a stranger. These are great ways to build resilience daily.

Learn how to be more intelligent with emotions by increasing your ability to perceive, use, understand and manage emotions in yourself and others. Sue Langley and her team at Emotional Intelligence Worldwide teach these techniques in their [Leading with Emotional Intelligence program](#).



"Wellbeing is a combination of feeling good as well as actually having meaning, good relationships and accomplishment."

MARTIN SELIGMAN





OPTIMISM

If we are optimistic we tend to see more solutions. We tend to be more successful as we believe they will work. We stay motivated.

Blind optimism or rose-coloured glasses is not what we mean. Flexible, realistic optimism is about seeing the rocks on the road as well as a path through them. It is about the way we explain our experience, which is influenced by the way we feel and can change day to day.

Think about optimism and pessimism as two ends of a spectrum. How we feel may impact where we are sitting on that spectrum at any point in time. If today you are feeling down and worried, you may have a more pessimistic explanatory style. If tomorrow you are feeling positive and upbeat, you may view the same situation with a more optimistic explanatory style. Just as importantly, optimism can be learned.

Martin Seligman, one of the fathers of positive psychology, explains that we see the world through three lenses: personal (about me - not me); permanent (always - not always), and pervasive (everything - not everything).

When a problem occurs, an optimistic thinker believes they are not completely at fault and circumstances may have played a part; the situation is fleeting and changeable, and the problem will not affect their whole life. This enables them to focus on solving the problem step by step with resources within their control.

“Optimism is a tendency to expect the best possible outcome or dwell on the most hopeful aspects of a situation.”

Martin Seligman

A setback can set pessimistic thinking in motion, quickly turning negative thoughts into beliefs that influence the way we feel and react.

Break the cycle by distracting yourself and focussing on something else. A physical ritual or visual reminder can help you learn an optimistic habit. For example, if you want to remember to smile more, keep a note on your bathroom mirror or buy a bracelet or something that when you see it will remind you of your commitment to your positive behaviour.

Challenge negative thoughts and substitute alternative causes that are changeable, specific and impersonal. Think of all the positives in your life and remind yourself that bad things will pass. Cultivate positive beliefs that will expand your experience and set yourself up for greater success.



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GRATITUDE

Gratitude is the quality of being thankful, the readiness to show appreciation and return kindness. It makes us aware of the good things that happen and connects us to a sense of life's wonder.

There is no diminishing return for gratitude. Thanking others makes us more tolerant of differences, creating a sense of camaraderie and belonging.

Researchers also associate gratitude with psychological growth and a coping style known as positive interpretation. When we appreciate something it increases in value and we are more able to realise its full worth.

Ken Sheldon and Sonja Lyubomirsky found that when people with high levels of appreciation experience significant life changes they are more likely to value the experience and feel glad it happened. Continued appreciation of positive changes - a new romance, dream job or successful weight loss - counteracts the natural tendency of humans to adapt and revert back to previous levels of happiness.

Rather than taking happy events and successes for granted, continuing to remind ourselves why they made us feel good in the first place makes us happier for longer.

All this shows why gratitude is one of the most powerful antidotes to negative emotion and depression. Studies show that when people write regularly about the things they are grateful for, their mood, coping behaviour and even physical health improves.

Start a weekly gratitude journal. You can also keep a checklist in your mind—as long as you do it mindfully. The most important thing is to make this activity meaningful, not something you do because you have to. You are also training your brain to notice positive experiences that happen to you, increasing your natural positivity.

“Let us be grateful to the people who make us happy; they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom.”

Marcel Proust





STRENGTHS

When we use our strengths, we enjoy what we are doing, do it better, and feel we are working toward our potential.

Strengths psychologist Alex Linley defines a strength as “a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking or feeling that is authentic and energising to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance.” In other words, strengths allow us to be our best self.

Research shows that when people use their strengths they feel happier and more confident, are less stressed, more resilient, and more engaged in their self-development. When combining our strengths with others and assisting them to use theirs, we build stronger and more co-operative relationships, enabling greater collaboration and teamwork.

Many people don't know their strengths and are not sure how to leverage them. Linley has some great tips to get to know your strengths or spot them in others.



“Strengths energise people, enabling them to be at their best.”

Alex Linley

NOTICE:

- **Childhood memories.** What do you remember doing as a child that you still do now, possibly better?
- **Energy.** What activities give you an energetic buzz when you are doing them?
- **Authenticity.** When do you feel most like the “real you”?
- **Ease.** What activities come naturally to you? What do you excel at – sometimes, it seems, without even trying?
- **Attention.** Where do you naturally pay attention? You're more likely to focus on things that play to your strengths.
- **Rapid learning.** What are the things you have picked up quickly, learning them almost effortlessly?
- **Motivation.** What motivates you? What activities do you do simply for the love of doing them?
- **Voice.** When you notice a shift in passion, energy and engagement, you're probably talking about a strength.
- **Words and phrases.** When you're saying “I love to...” or “It's just great when...” chances are you are talking about a strength.
- **‘To do’ lists.** Notice the things that never make it on to your ‘to do’ list. Things that always seem to get done often reveal an underlying strength that means we never need to be asked twice.

You can get an accurate understanding of your strengths, and the energy that underpins them, by taking a [Realise2 strengths assessment](#).

Positive psychology in practice

AT WORK

Start a team meeting by asking everyone to share one really good thing that happened recently. It's a great way to get people in a positive mood—and get to know them better. People are also more ready to contribute fresh ideas.

Create a place to post and share your gratitude thoughts with your team. A gratitude board is an excellent way to start or end the day. People tend to carry home positive thoughts and emotions that counteract the stress of a busy working day. Each Monday wipe the board clean and start with a fresh lot of gratitude!

Remember to thank and express appreciation to your team. Notice what they do well—and the strengths they are using and developing that enable them to deliver great value and contribute to the success of the team.



Positive psychology in practice

AT HOME OR WITH THE KIDS

Share three best things that happened each day with your kids. This ritual is great for story time. Sue Langley and Janne Hardy wrote [The Scribbly Bark Tree and the Dragon](#), an illustrated fable that engages children and adults in this positive psychology practice.

Kids are really good at strengths spotting. Especially when they learn that each person has something good within them and a unique set of strengths they can grow over time. Calling attention to what is right, good and strong can also redirect kids toward positive behaviour when they get caught pointing out each others' weaknesses and foibles.

The [VIA Survey for Children](#) is a reliable measure to identify strengths in kids below the age of nine. You can also use fun games and simple tools like [Strengths Cards](#), which are available from Emotional Intelligence Worldwide.



Positive psychology in practice

HELPING PEOPLE

If you are a coach, leader or trainer empowering people to be the best they can be, one of the most important positive practices you can apply is to look for what people do well and help them strengthen those capabilities.

Too often people focus on fixing weaknesses or “development areas”. While helping people design strategies to mitigate their weaknesses is important, they will perform far better and feel more motivated and fulfilled when learning to play to their strengths more effectively.

If you are a psychologist or health worker helping people cope with ill health or overcome life’s challenges, connecting them to their strengths helps them build inner resources, positive self-image and wellbeing over time.

A tool such as [Realise2](#) can give people a language and appreciation for their strengths.

In either case, the more you equip people with tools to generate positive emotion, create a growth mindset, practise mindfulness, increase resilience, learn optimism, express gratitude and develop strengths, the happier and more successful they will be.



Want to learn more about positive psychology?

Here are some upcoming courses provided by Sue Langley, Emotional Intelligence Worldwide and the Langley Group Institute.

Diploma of Positive Psychology & Wellbeing

Become a qualified positive psychology practitioner

Gain a robust, nationally recognised qualification in positive psychology, the first of its kind in the world. Designed for busy professionals such as coaches, psychologists, HR professionals, business leaders, teachers, school wellbeing officers and anyone who wants to apply positive psychology to increase individual, business or community wellbeing.

Call +61 2 9398 1850 or visit www.langleygroupinstitute.com

Realise2 practitioner certification

Become a certified Realise2 strengths practitioner

Unlock strengths potential and performance in the people you coach, counsel or lead with the latest strengths assessment and development tool. Help people access the energy behind strengths to reduce burnout and increase wellbeing.

Book early for 2015 as places fill fast.

Call +61 2 9399 3989 or visit www.emotionalintelligenceworldwide.com

Positive Psychology Book Club

Take a guided tour of positive psychology

Delve into ten books that have made a critical contribution to the field with support from positive psychology experts and like-minded people. Join the full course for 2015 or attend as a casual member.

Call +61 2 9399 3989 or visit www.emotionalintelligenceworldwide.com

Leading with Emotional Intelligence

Learn the science and practice of emotional intelligence

Increase your self-awareness, resilience and emotional intelligence so you can lead yourself and others to success. Select courses available in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane or ask us about bringing this program to your organisation or professional network.

Call +61 2 9399 3989 or visit www.emotionalintelligenceworldwide.com



Want to bring positive psychology into your organisation or school?

Our partners provide inspiring training and expert advice, underpinned by the science of positive psychology.

Langley Group

Positive solutions for organisations

The Langley Group applies positive psychology, emotional intelligence and neuroscience to get the best from people and organisations. They work with organisations around the world to grow their capability and people skills in ways that sustain performance, engagement and wellbeing.

Call **+61 2 9399 3989** or visit www.langleygroup.com.au

Growing Great Schools

Positive education for schools

Growing Great Schools supports teachers and schools to design and implement positive practices and build whole-school wellbeing. A collaboration between leading researchers and practitioners in wellbeing, education and positive psychology, Growing Great Schools applies a uniquely designed process to cultivate and sustain safe, supportive and flourishing learning communities.

Call **+61 2 9399 3989** or visit www.growinggreatschools.com



Sue Langley

Keynotes and media appearances

Sue Langley is a speaker, master trainer, global business consultant, researcher and leading advisor on the practical workplace applications of neuroscience, emotional intelligence and positive psychology.

Sue is speaking about happiness and creativity at *Happiness & Its Causes* in 2015. [LINK](#).

Call **+61 2 9399 3989** or visit www.suelangley.com



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Meet the Langley Group team and join us for a unique showcase of the innovation, opportunities and technology that are transforming health at wellbeing at [The Wellness Show](#). Over 50 organisations will be represented at this free event co-located with the 10th annual [Happiness & Its Causes](#) conference.