

Positive Psychology Practices: How to Smile instead of Stress. Part 1

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The start of the fall semester can be a stressful time of year. To cope, we may be used to turning to temporary fixes, which may be unproductive or even unhealthy. What if, instead, we chose to build upon what can make us thrive? That is what positive psychology is all about – focusing on strengths instead of simply fixing what is wrong. This developing branch of psychology studies how human virtues increase life satisfaction. By using the findings of positive psychology, you can become an overall happier person in light of any stress.

Theories and practices of human happiness started in the 1950s with humanistic psychology. But it wasn't until 1998, when then President of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman, paved the way towards expansion of the field of Positive Psychology. Along with others, he began finding empirical support that promoting mental health, rather than merely treating mental illness, leads to a happier life. The field has been growing ever since.

Since then, several routes to a more satisfying life have been found, which include cultivating life skills such as learning optimism, building resilience, and relishing in the good. This article discusses the first two of these skills.

Learn Optimism

Research shows that optimists are higher achievers, are less likely to suffer from depression, and have better overall health. Optimism is not about having your “head in the clouds.” Instead, it is a realistic outlook on life, unburdened by weighty negative thinking. Consider the debate about the glass being half empty or half full. Optimists recognize that some of the drink is missing, but choose to appreciate what is there.

It has also been found that pessimists can become optimists, by reframing negative self-talk. This means consciously turning negative thoughts into positive ones. Let's consider the following work scenario to illustrate how this works:

Imagine that you have just been faced with a daunting task at work. Your boss expects you to complete it independently, by the end of the day. Here's how using positive psychology can help you thrive in the midst of this stressful situation:

1. Identify how you describe your situation. How you interpret events determines your level of optimism or pessimism; this, in turn influences your stress levels and overall wellness. Try writing down your initial reactions to situations to find out whether you are falling into any negative, unrealistic or disempowering thinking traps. Unhelpful thought patterns include self-blame and judgment, perfectionism and unrealistic expectations, exaggerating the negatives and minimizing the positives in the situation.

One way to think through this optimistically would be to realize that even though you will be working harder than normal for a few hours; the project will be finished when you leave work, so you'll have a relaxing evening. You could also remind yourself that you were assigned this because your boss felt it needed to be done to help out your place of employment, not because she likes to torture you.

2. Challenge negativity. If you notice your pessimism start to break through, consciously make an effort to challenge it. Ask yourself if your thoughts really true, or just a product of your emotions. If the latter is the case, consider other ways you could think about the situation. Reframe your negative outlook by making it more realistic, encouraging, or empowering.

At work, you may think, "I always get stuck doing the worst things. I can't get it done on time the way she wants it." If this is exaggeration, reassure yourself that there is a reason you were chosen for the job. You could replace the negative thought with something like "My boss sees that I am motivated and well-suited to handle this. Therefore, I am confident that I will do great."

Sometimes a negative assessment of a situation is accurate. If you are certain the task you have been assigned is impossible for one person to do by the deadline, be proactive. Express your worries with your boss ahead of time to save stress and panic. This way you are more likely to get help or an extension. Then, lace up. Give it your all until the deadline. If you do everything you can, be proud of whatever it is you do finish.

Reframing thoughts is a skill; as such it will take practice to master it. Perseverance is worthwhile: over time, the pessimistic voice will soften.

Build Resilience

People who are resilient cope with stress in healthy ways and more easily bounce back in times of adversity. They also tend to age more slowly, and live longer, healthier lives. Resilience doesn't always come naturally, but it can be learned through specific life actions and habits. The following practices have been shown to increase resilience:

1. Maintain good relationships (with family, friends, and others), and utilize them during troubling times
2. Accept circumstances that cannot be changed
3. Develop realistic goals, and move towards them
4. Take decisive actions in adverse situations
5. Look for opportunities of self-discovery in the midst of grief
6. Develop self-confidence
7. Keep a long-term perspective and consider stressful events in a broader context
8. Maintain a hopeful outlook, expecting good things and visualizing your desires
9. Take care of your mind and body, exercising regularly, and paying attention to your own needs and feelings
10. Forgive instead of holding grudges

Don't worry about mastering every technique right away. Learning optimism and building resilience take practice. Choose two or three tips to work on at a time. In the next newsletter, we will have even more ways to apply positive psychology to your life!

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Find more information and resources on positive psychology in our [Wellness Under Pressure Toolkit](#).