

## WHAT IT IS

The term positive psychology was coined by Martin Seligman in 1998. Psychology is normally focused on the problems, symptoms, and weaknesses of clients. Treatment is centered on identifying symptoms and looking for ways to improve behavior and reduce pain. In contrast, positive psychology is the study of what goes right in life, from birth to death, and at all stops in between. It is the study of strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. It emphasizes that what is good in life is just as genuine as what is bad. Positive psychology takes the focus away from suffering, weaknesses, problems, and pathology and instead focuses on what helps a person go from average to extraordinary.

The core lessons from positive psychology start with the things that do not lead to lasting happiness:

1. Wealth is only weakly related to happiness both within and across nations, particularly when income is above the poverty level.
2. Activities that make people happy in small doses – such as shopping, good food, and making money– do not lead to fulfillment in the long term, indicating that these have quickly diminishing returns.

What does work to achieve this type of elevation are these concepts:

1. People who express gratitude on a regular basis have better physical health, optimism, progress toward goals, and well-being, and help others more.
2. People who witness others perform good deeds experience an emotion called ‘elevation’ that motivates them to perform their own good deeds.

## WHO TO USE IT WITH

Those who are interested in moving beyond their average experiences and simply living a life free of psychological symptoms. It also is useful for those who get stuck on the cycle of trying to improve symptoms for psychological problems but find themselves wanting to be able to do something more in their lives and achieve a higher level of satisfaction and happiness.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. What are some of the things that give you joy and happiness in your everyday life? How long do these bursts of happiness last?
2. Think back in your life to some examples that have given you a sense of happiness that lasts over a longer period. Are there commonalities? What about the experience made the happiness last?

## TEACHING INSIGHTS

- A quote on positive psychology “The law of flotation was not discovered by contemplating the sinking of things, but by contemplating the floating of things which floated naturally, and then intelligently asking why they did so” (Thomas Troward).
- UPenn’s [Authentic Happiness](#) website and survey can be useful to assess happiness as a concept.
- The founder of positive psychology, Martin Seligman has a [Ted Talk](#) available that is a great way to better understand these concepts.

*Before reading this entire worksheet, take a moment to complete the first section called “Your Challenge.”*

## **YOUR CHALLENGE**

Think about a time when you did something for yourself. This could be buying something for yourself, like a new video game or pair of shoes, or taking yourself out for your favorite meal. It could be an activity like going to the movies, getting a massage, or playing a game/sport. Think about this experience and how this made you feel in the moment, after a week, after a month, and then after six months.

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Initial Feelings</b>	<b>After a Week</b>	<b>After a Month</b>	<b>After Six Months</b>

Did the emotions from the experience remain the same or fade over time? Researchers suggest these positive emotions generally fade over time. Continue reading to learn how to increase happiness.

## **FINDING HAPPINESS**

A particular field in psychology has studied how people move beyond feeling average to a more extraordinary sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. What they found was money, material goods, and fun experiences create an initial burst of happiness, but that happiness isn’t lasting. Certainly, having enough money to pay the bills and even work in some fun activities is important for happiness. However, once those basic needs are met, more money does not translate to more happiness or life satisfaction.

Positive psychology posits that people who are happy are often those who express gratitude to others in their lives. This could be someone who helped you through a difficult time, a coworker who made an impact in your life, or even someone who you just met, like a barista at a coffee house. These expressions of thanks and gratitude have been shown to improve our overall satisfaction and happiness in life.

Another way to increase happiness is through the performance of good deeds. Research shows seeing other people perform good deeds or altruistic actions toward others leads to an emotion called ‘elevation.’ This elevation, in turn, encourages people to perform their own good deeds and experience their own positive effects from these altruistic acts.

## **THE NEXT STEP**

Consider a time when you did something for someone else, like writing a letter of thanks to someone who made a difference in your life or making dinner for a loved one. The task should be something that wasn’t expected of you and something you did because you wanted to do something kind for someone else. As above, rate how this experience made you feel at first, after a week, after a month, and then after six months.

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Initial Feelings</b>	<b>After a Week</b>	<b>After a Month</b>	<b>After Six Months</b>

Most share that this experience of giving back to others and expressing gratitude often generates a longer lasting positive impact in their lives. What was your experience with this?