How Do Simple Positive Activities Increase Well-Being?

Sonja Lyubomirsky

Kristin Layous

University of California, Riverside

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Please address correspondence to:
Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D.
Department of Psychology
University of California
Riverside, CA 92521
sonja.lyubomirsky@ucr.edu
Abstract

Theory and research suggest that people can increase their happiness through simple intentional positive activities, such as expressing gratitude or practicing kindness. Investigators have recently begun to study the optimal conditions underlying positive activities’ success and the mechanisms by which they work. Our positive activity model proposes that features of positive activities (e.g., their dosage and variety), features of persons (e.g., their motivation and effort), and person-activity fit moderate the effect of positive activities on well-being. Furthermore, the model posits four mediating variables: positive emotions, positive thoughts, positive behaviors, and need satisfaction. Empirical evidence supporting the model and future directions are discussed.

**Keywords**: happiness, subjective well-being, positive activities, positive interventions, self-improvement
HOW DO SIMPLE POSITIVE ACTIVITIES INCREASE WELL-BEING?

Happiness not only feels good; it is good. Happy people have more stable marriages, stronger immune systems, higher incomes, and more creative ideas than their less happy peers (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Furthermore, cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental studies demonstrate that happiness (i.e., long-term positive affect or well-being) is not merely a correlate or consequence of success, but a cause (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). For the majority of people around the globe who report wanting to be happy (Diener, 2000), these findings would be disheartening if happiness could not be achieved purposely and intentionally. Despite evidence suggesting that individual differences in well-being are strongly influenced by genetics (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996), researchers theorize that much of people’s happiness is under their control through intentional activities (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). A study that combined results from 51 randomized controlled interventions found that people prompted to engage in activities like thinking gratefully, optimistically, or mindfully became significantly happier (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

By examining the characteristics of dispositionally happy people (e.g., grateful and optimistic thinking, prosocial behavior; Lyubomirsky, 2001), researchers have been able to posit activities that might increase people’s happiness if deliberately practiced. Thus, we define positive activities as simple, intentional, and regular practices meant to mimic the myriad healthy thoughts and behaviors associated with naturally happy people. The efficacy of numerous positive activities for improving well-being has now been tested empirically. Experimenters have prompted people to write gratitude letters (Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2011; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), count blessings (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, et al., 2005; Seligman
et al., 2005), perform kind acts (Della Porta, Bao, & Lyubomirsky, 2012; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, et al., 2005; Sheldon, Boehm, & Lyubomirsky, 2012), cultivate strengths (Seligman et al., 2005), visualize ideal future selves (Boehm et al., 2011; King, 2001; Layous, Nelson, & Lyubomirsky, in press), and meditate (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008). All of these practices are brief, self-administered, and cost-effective.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE SUCCESS OF POSITIVE ACTIVITIES

Research on happiness-increasing strategies shows that they work (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), but under what conditions do they work best? Our positive activity model (see Figure 1) draws on theoretical and empirical evidence to depict 1) an overview of the activity features and person features that render a positive activity optimally effective, and 2) the mechanisms that underlie the positive activity’s success. Furthermore, to determine the extent to which particular person or activity characteristics impact a positive activity’s success, we contend that each characteristic of an activity (e.g., dosage) has to be calibrated to fit with the characteristics of the person (e.g., effort, personality; represented in Figure 1 as person-activity fit).

Moderators

Using randomized controlled studies, researchers have identified several conditions under which positive activities are most effective at enhancing happiness. Activity-oriented factors concern the positive activity itself (e.g., what type of behavior and how often practiced), whereas person-oriented factors pertain to the person practicing the positive activity (e.g., whether the person is motivated to pursue happiness). Lastly, person-activity fit is the customized match between activity and person features.

Features of the activity
Features of positive activities—including their dosage, variety, sequence, and social support—all influence their success. For example, as with the efficacy of any medical or psychological treatment, the dosage (i.e., frequency and timing) of a positive activity matters. In one study, performing five kind acts all in one day during each week (for 6 weeks) resulted in larger increases in well-being than performing five kind acts throughout the week (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, et al., 2005), indicating that “watering down” positive activities by spreading them out too much might limit their potency. Other positive activities, however, could easily be overdone. For example, counting blessings was less effective three times per week than once per week (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, et al., 2005). Interestingly, both studies suggest that positive activities performed once a week are maximally effective, possibly because many cultural routines (involving work, worship, and even television) are conducted weekly.

Knowing the ideal dosage of positive activities is tricky, however, because it likely varies by person and by activity. For example, in naturalistic settings, people report practicing happiness-increasing activities several times a week for more than an hour each time (Parks, Della Porta, Pierce, Zilea, & Lyubomirsky, 2012), and users of a positive activity smartphone application report bigger benefits when they login more frequently (Parks et al., 2012, Study 3). Perhaps when people are free to choose their happiness-increasing activities, they do not view the activities as cumbersome and gladly perform them more often and for longer. Hence, person-activity fit likely governs optimal dosage.

Furthermore, when people choose their own positive activities rather than following an experimenter’s instructions, they may be more likely to vary their practices. Theory and research suggest that positive changes in people’s lives (such as exercise; Glaros & Janelle, 2001) are more likely to promote sustained boosts in well-being if the events generated by the positive
changes are varied (for a review, see Lyubomirsky, 2011). For example, participants who committed varied kindnesses every week increased more in well-being than those who committed the same kindnesses (Sheldon et al., 2012).

Variety matters not only to the practice of a single positive activity, but also to the practice of multiple activities. Indeed, participants in the naturalistic study reported performing almost eight different positive activities simultaneously (Parks et al., 2012), and online participants obtained the biggest benefits when practicing two or four concurrent activities (Schueller & Parks, 2012). Further evidence suggests that certain positive activities might be good starter activities. U. S. participants who began a 6-week happiness intervention by writing gratitude letters increased more in well-being than those who began by performing acts of kindness (Layous, Lee, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Expressing gratitude first might have served as a “trigger” that precipitated an immediate upward spiral of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001) and/or galvanized people to “pay it forward,” thereby exerting more effort and ultimately reaping greater benefits.

Positive activities, like other behavioral changes, are also more successful when imbued with social support (Bandura, 1986). For example, participants who received autonomy-supporting messages from a peer while performing kind acts saw larger improvements in happiness than those who did not receive social support or performed a control activity (Della Porta et al., 2012). Similarly, students who read an empathic peer testimonial about the challenges of an optimism-boosting exercise increased more in positive affect than all other groups (Layous, Nelson, et al., 2012). The results from these two studies indicate that even virtual social support can bolster the benefits of positive activities.
Factors like variety and social support can conceivably apply to the practice of any positive activity (see Activity Features listed under “Across” in Figure 1). Other factors, however, differentiate positive activities from one another (see list under “Between”) and hence can illuminate for whom such activities work best. For example, positive activities can be relatively more self-oriented (e.g., practicing optimism) or other-oriented (e.g., expressing gratitude). Collectivists might benefit more from other-oriented positive activities and individualists from self-oriented activities (for suggestive evidence, see Boehm et al., 2011). Further, certain positive activities are social/behavioral in nature (e.g., being kind), whereas others are reflective/cognitive (e.g., savoring happy times), potentially benefiting particularly lonely versus frazzled individuals, respectively. Lastly, positive activities differ in their time-orientation, either focused on the past (gratitude), present (savoring), or future (optimistic thinking; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Older adults might benefit more from reflecting on their legacies, whereas youth might benefit more from visualizing bright futures.

*Features of the person*

Overall, positive activities that have optimal features are more likely to promote durable well-being. However, attributes of the person engaging in the activity also matter. As illustrated in Figure 1 (see Person Features), for people to benefit from a positive activity (or any self-improvement behavior, for that matter), they have to effortfully engage in it (Layous, Lee, et al., 2012; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011), be motivated to become happier (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011), and believe that their efforts will pay off (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1986; Layous, Nelson, et al., in press). For example, participants who deliberately chose to complete “happiness-increasing” exercises (rather than neutral ones) and who put more effort into them (as assessed by judges) showed bigger gains in well-being (Lyubomirsky et al., 2011).
In addition to people’s motivation, efforts, and beliefs, their personalities may also affect how much they stand to gain. Although the association between personality and happiness is long-established (Costa & McCrae, 1980), researchers are only now exploring whether personality influences a positive activity’s success. Recent evidence showed that people high in extraversion and openness are especially poised to benefit from positive activities (Senf & Liau, in press).

People’s initial affective state when they embark on a positive activity also predicts how much they benefit, but the evidence is mixed. Some research suggests that those low in positive affect (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009) or with moderate depressive symptoms (Seligman et al., 2005) benefit the most from positive activities, perhaps because they have more room to improve. Other evidence indicates that moderately depressed individuals have deficits that prevent them from taking full advantage of some positive practices—such individuals, for example, benefit more from simple pleasant activities than reflective ones (Sin, Della Porta, & Lyubomirsky, 2011). More research is needed to identify specific activities that are optimal for individuals within specific affective ranges.

The degree to which people perceive support from their own social network—especially support aimed at their pursuit of happiness—is also likely to affect their ability to reap rewards from positive activities. We predict that happiness seekers who feel supported by close others in their positive practices will see relatively greater improvements in well-being (see Wing & Jeffrey, 1999, for parallel findings regarding weight loss).

Lastly, demographic variables may influence well-being gains from positive activities. For example, older people benefit relatively more from practicing a range of positive activities (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), perhaps because they have more time to commit to the activities,
take them more seriously, and engage in them more effortfully. Also, Westerners gain more from positive activities (namely, expressing gratitude and optimism) than Easterners (Boehm et al., 2011), possibly because they value and express happiness more (Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao, 1995; Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006). Further research should examine the role of other demographic factors, such as sex and socioeconomic status. For example, people struggling to afford food are likely to regard the pursuit of happiness as frivolous.

*Person-activity fit*

Although features of positive activities and of the doers of the activities broadly influence their success, certain types of activities are better for certain types of people. We predict that activity-oriented and person-oriented factors interact with one another (see overlap of the Activity and Person boxes in Figure 1). This notion of person-activity fit is supported by studies showing that the degree to which participants report enjoying a positive activity predicts how often they complete that activity (Schueller, 2010) and derive happiness from it (Lyubomirsky, 2008).

*Mechanisms*

Although research is revealing the conditions under which positive activities increase well-being, investigators still know little about how positive activities work, or the processes by which they boost well-being. We posit that positive activities are only considered positive for an individual to the extent that they stimulate increases in positive emotions, positive thoughts, positive behaviors, and need satisfaction, which in turn increase one’s happiness. For example, increases in positive emotions triggered by a meditation positive activity mediated the relationship between the activity and subsequent improvements in such resources as social relationships and physical health. These personal resources then boosted life satisfaction
Engaging in positive activities also leads people to construe life events more positively. In one study, people who expressed gratitude and optimism reported their weekly experiences as more satisfying over time, although independent raters did not rate these experiences as objectively improving (Dickerhoof, 2007). Further, positive activities can prompt people to engage in unrelated positive behaviors. For example, participants instructed to “count their blessings” increased their time spent exercising (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Practicing positive activities may also boost well-being by satisfying basic psychological needs, such as autonomy (control), relatedness (connectedness), and competence (efficacy; Deci & Ryan, 2000). In a 6-week intervention, expressing gratitude and optimism increased self-reported autonomy and relatedness (but not competence), which in turn increased life satisfaction (Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2012). In a study that directly manipulated the hypothesized mediators, people who engaged in autonomy- and relatedness-fulfilling activities saw greater increases in well-being than those who focused on their life circumstances (Sheldon et al., 2010). More research is needed to establish the mediating role of competence and to investigate whether particular positive activities might be better suited to fulfilling particular needs.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Happiness seekers no longer need rely on unsubstantiated advice from self-help books, magazine sidebars, or infomercials. Instead, a growing body of evidence based on randomized controlled experiments demonstrates that relatively simple intentional changes in one’s thoughts and behaviors can precipitate meaningful increases in happiness. Furthermore, as highlighted by the positive activity model, investigators are beginning to pinpoint (although likely non-exhaustively) the conditions under which positive activities are most efficacious and the processes by which they work. The model also reveals gaps in empirical evidence (e.g., the role
of social support) and conflicting findings (e.g., the role of one’s initial affective state) that await further research.

The positive activity model addresses activity-oriented and person-oriented factors that impact the success of positive activities as people perform them. However, future research should also investigate how people select positive activities in the first place. For example, individuals high in sensation-seeking might choose varied and novel (rather than similar and familiar) positive activities, and mildly depressed individuals might choose relatively undemanding activities.

Our model could also be extended to predict the extent to which the doer of positive activities persists at them—and hence continues to reap benefits (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Seligman et al., 2005). One of the obstacles to both continued engagement and to continued benefits is hedonic adaptation; in other words, the rewards of positive activities dissipate with time (Lyubomirsky, 2011; Sheldon et al., 2012). To avoid adaptation, happiness seekers should vary their positive practices (which to perform, how many, how often, with whom, etc.). Additionally, the more motivated individuals are to pursue happiness (Lyubomirsky et al., 2011), the more their families or cultures endorse the pursuit, and the more resources (e.g., time, effort) they have to accomplish it, the more likely they are to maintain their efforts (but see Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir, 2011).

In sum, as researchers begin to understand the how, what, when, and why of happiness-increasing strategies, they are better positioned to provide empirically-based advice to the millions of people—in family, school, work, health, organizational, or mental health settings—who yearn to be happier.
Notes

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Please address correspondence to:

Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D.
Department of Psychology
University of California
Riverside, CA 92521
Phone: 951-827-5041
Fax: 951-827-3985
Email: sonja.lyubomirsky@ucr.edu
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Recommended Reading

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Layous, K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (in press). The how, who, what, when, and why of happiness: Mechanisms underlying the success of positive interventions. In J. Gruber & J. Moskowitz (Eds.), *Light and dark side of positive emotion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the moderators and mediators proposed by the positive activity model.


Figure Caption

Figure 1. The positive activity model aims to explain how and why performing positive activities makes people happier. As illustrated at top, positive activities increase positive emotions, positive thoughts, positive behaviors, and need satisfaction, all of which in turn enhance well-being. Features of positive activities (e.g., their dosage and variety) and the person (e.g., motivation and effort) impact the degree to which the activities improve well-being. The optimal “person-activity fit” (represented by the overlap between the activity and person features) further predicts increases in well-being.