

Practical Approaches to Happiness

Richard R. Rubin, PhD, CDE

I'm a psychologist, so I've spent most of my career talking to my patients about their problems. But more and more recently I'm talking to my patients about happiness, an approach some of us are calling *positive psychology*.

Happiness exercises

Positive psychology helps people learn to be happier. Recently, some positive psychology researchers designed some exercises that they thought might increase happiness, and they invited people who visited the researchers' website to complete one of the exercises (which were randomly assigned). People who participated in the study completed questionnaires that assessed happiness and depression before they began their assigned exercise, after completing the exercise, and one week, and one, three, and six months later.

Here are the exercises:

Gratitude visit. During the next week, write and deliver a letter of gratitude to someone you have not properly thanked.

Three good things in life. Each night for a week, write down three things that went well that day and why.

You at your best. Write about a time you were at your best, and reflect each night for the next week on your personal strengths that made that time your best.

Identify signature strengths. Identify your personal signature strengths.

Using signature strengths in new ways. Identify your personal signature strengths, and use at least one in a new way every day for a week.

Early memories. Write about your earliest memories each night for a week.

The last exercise was included as a "placebo". The researchers did not expect the early memories exercise to have any effect on happiness or depression, but comparing the results in this group to those in other groups provides the most accurate estimate of the benefits of the "real" exercises.

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Benefits of the exercises

As I said, the results of the study were very interesting.

- All participants were happier and less depressed right after completing their exercise than they had been before they started it. This included participants in the placebo group.
- Only two of the exercises – three good things, and using signature strengths in new ways – led to long-lasting (six month) improvements in happiness and depression. For these two exercises happiness actually improved from each assessment to the next, and happiness was highest six months after the exercise.
- The gratitude letter exercise had the biggest immediate effect on happiness and depression, but these benefits decreased over time, and they had disappeared six months after the exercise.
- People who kept practicing their exercise on their own (after the week it was assigned) stayed happier and less depressed than those who didn't keep practicing. This was true for all exercises.

Will these exercises work for you?

It seems that reminding yourself each day of things that went well and why can contribute to lasting happiness (and less depression), and that using signature strengths in new ways can have the same benefits. Keep in mind that the people participating in this study were looking for something to help them feel happier, and that their scores on the depression questionnaire indicated that they tended to be mildly depressed when they started the study. If you are already very happy and have no symptoms of depression, you probably won't benefit as much from doing the exercises. On the other hand, it's pretty amazing that people in the study got the benefits they did from exercises they did completely on their own, with no professional help, so you could benefit too.

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My experience

I've used the three good things exercise myself for many years. I can still remember when I started. It was almost 25 years ago, during a very difficult period for me. I was feeling discouraged and bad about myself, my head and my heart filled with everything that was going wrong. Nights were the worst as I lay in bed struggling to fall asleep.

One particularly bad night I decided that I *had* to do something: I had to stop focusing on how awful things were. So I tried to think of something that had gone well that day, no matter how small that thing had been. I made the commitment to come up with three good things. That first night it took me almost an hour to complete my list, and the "good things" were really not all that good. But it was a start; I felt a little better, and the next night it took me only about half an hour to come up with my three good things. Like the people in the study I told you about, the more I practiced the exercise the better it worked for me. I no longer do the exercise every night as I used to, but I still do it whenever I need it, and it always helps.

Final thoughts

The happiness intervention studies suggest that there are times when building the capacity for happiness may work as well or better than traditional counseling or medication for relieving emotional distress.

Pick one of these happiness exercises and try it yourself. For more information on positive psychology, go to www.positivepsychology.org.