



Positive psychology
Realise your potential

An introduction



With our fast-paced lives, there is a tendency to focus on chasing goals as well as typically being more critical than kind to ourselves. This means we often miss out on fully appreciating small moments of happiness and success. That is where positive psychology comes in!

Positive psychology is a scientific movement devoted to the study of 'optimal human functioning'.

It describes the study of understanding how to identify, develop and promote the positive elements of life that enable a person to thrive. The aim is to enhance individual personal potential and improve wellbeing. For example, you might aspire to be more creative in your approach or to make time for self-compassion and kindness.

Positive psychology can significantly benefit you, by:

- Helping foster an optimistic outlook and attitude towards life.
- Enabling more positive emotions and increased self-esteem.
- Supporting resilience towards adversity.
- Enhancing relationships with others.
- Supporting you to find meaning and engagement in life.
- Decreasing symptoms of poor mental health (e.g. symptoms of anxiety/depression).
- Increasing life satisfaction.

The models and theories of positive psychology can be adapted and personalised to assist you, whatever your goal may be. Positive psychology is for everyone! Whether you are reading this booklet as an individual receiving therapy, having recently completed therapy, or recognising a need to adapt your behaviours to enhance your wellbeing, we hope this booklet will provide you with the tools and understanding to assist you on this journey.

A brief history of positive psychology

The search for happiness dates back to the philosopher Aristotle who argued that fulfilment and quality of life were the foundations to human incentive. However, the discipline of psychology continues to explore and question what contributes to optimal human functioning.

Much research has been undertaken to explore humans in the context of adversity, especially following the Second World War, when research focus and therapeutic resources were oriented around recovery and therapy. However the introduction of positive psychology by Martin Seligman in 1998 marked a shift in psychological focus.

The effectiveness of positive psychology interventions (PPIs) and the benefits they have on wellbeing are well supported by psychological research. Indeed, Martin Seligman continues to contribute to the study of positive psychology after more than 15 years, providing the field with new findings and models for different settings (e.g. therapy).

Originally, positive psychology suggested that humans have three simple psychological requirements:

1. The subjective level [**FEELING** good]
2. The individual level [**BEING** good]
3. The group level [**DOING** good]

Later in the research journey, two more points were added to the list (see below):

“As the discipline grows, if research-based interventions are effectively designed and applied, we anticipate a valuable impact on mental health across our society, with particular hope for youth interventions.”

Psychological requirements	Examples of related experiences
1. To feel positive emotion	To feel happiness or optimism
2. To engage in activities that give life meaning and purpose	Character strengths such as forgiveness or courage
3. To have positive relationships with others	Acting on interpersonal skills or with nurturance
4. To find meaning and fulfilment in what we do	To feel pride through reflection and gratitude
5. To seek and savour achievements and accomplishments	Setting realistic goals/recognising and validating the success

Positive psychology in action

Positive psychology is a scientific movement devoted to the study of 'optimal human functioning'. It is focused on learning how to become the best possible version of yourself. This will differ between individuals depending on what their strengths and goals look like. For example:

Bobby has a busy life and a stressful job. Recently, Bobby has found it harder to switch off from this at the end of the day. This is impacting Bobby's performance at work.

According to positive psychology, Bobby would benefit from engaging in activities that increase his experience of positive emotions and purpose.

For example, Bobby might practise a daily reflective activity (a diary or conversation) to consider any thoughts or feelings linked to his work, because Bobby knows that reflection and self-regulation are his signature strengths.

Or Bobby might re-watch a funny episode of his favourite TV show to boost his happiness, with the intention of relaxing, which aligns to Bobby's signature strengths of kindness and gratitude.

Positive psychology would encourage you to boost your experience of the five psychological requirements (as listed on the previous page), by using your individual character strengths to enhance your happiness and general wellbeing.

The PERMA-H Model (below) is a useful tool for achieving this. It outlines areas where you can engage in signature strengths to enhance your quality of life.



ACTIVITY: The PERMA-H Model
The table below describes how each component influences your wellbeing.

Write down some actions for each factor that you think would improve your wellbeing. For example, for relationships, you could try visiting and helping a relative and note how this makes you feel.

Positive emotion	Engagement	Relationships	Meaning	Achievement	Health
Feeling good emotions like joy or hope can aid us to deal with negative emotions or experiences.	Being involved and focused on the roles we play that occupy our lives, encouraging productivity.	The validity and influence of family or social circles may be a source of good feelings, for example, through giving support or feeling supported.	Establishing a sense of purpose which informs or motivates our actions and which can reflect positively on how you view yourself and your quality of life.	Focuses on how we challenge ourselves in order to develop and meet the realistic goals set for us. Offers positive emotions linked to reward.	Essential needs like food, water, rest, and overall feelings of physical health can influence perspective and motivation to act.

Table: The PERMA-H Model

The research

Influencing factors

Research into the effectiveness of PPIs has been measured across the globe. This has highlighted differences in the quality of optimal human functioning, how this is achieved, and the influences caused by factors such as age, culture, the form of PPI used, and if there are any mental health conditions.

Consistent findings

- The influence of PPIs on the quality of life for children and young people was greater than in the older population
- PPIs were shown to have a more present influence on improving wellbeing in the older population while having a greater effect of the quality of life in younger people.
- Differences in experiences of PPIs between gender are less significant in older people than those in early adulthood. However, the research is inconclusive as there are too many other factors.
- People with a clinical diagnosis experience PPIs as having a greater impact on their wellbeing and reducing symptoms of depression than people without a diagnosis.

How well it works

Recent research into PPIs has found a significant moderate effect on wellbeing. In a study using intervention styles like gratitude journals, recognising signature strengths, and creative writing tasks focused on their best state, individuals with an anxiety or depression diagnosis experienced an improvement, with their symptoms lessening following the PPIs. This improvement was maintained with the continued practice of the PPI.

These data reflect the opportunity of PPIs to improve general wellbeing as well as symptoms of poor mental health in people with psychiatric and somatic conditions.



Keeping a gratitude journal can be a helpful way to acknowledge the positive things in your life

Sarah's experience

Sarah experienced a noteworthy decrease in her anxiety related symptoms and a boost in hope and happiness following the use of PPIs.

Paul's experience

Paul has clinical depression and had engaged in 15 weeks of reading and discussing ways of improving quality of life, as part of a PPI group. Afterwards, Paul no longer met the criteria for clinical depression.

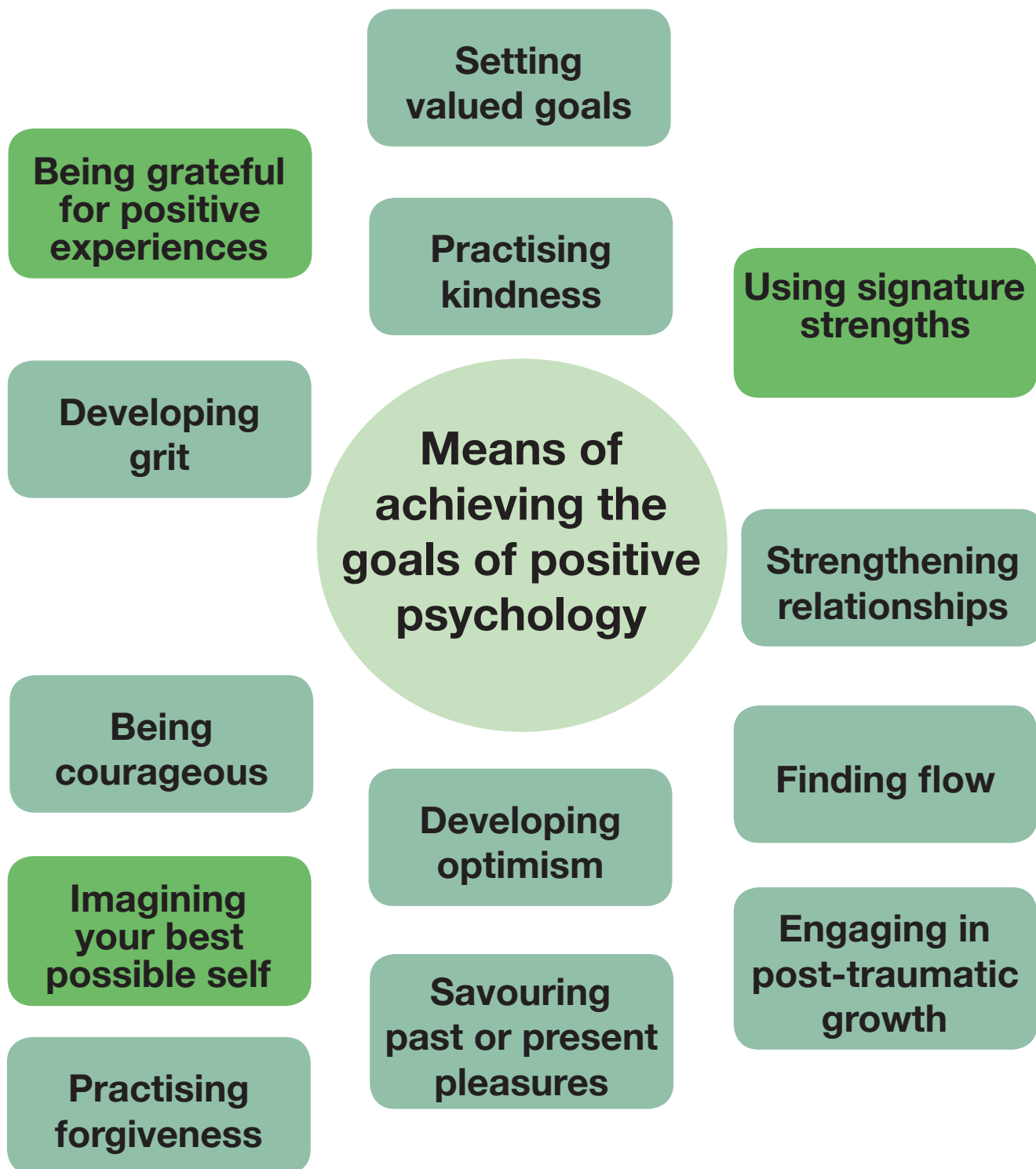
ACTIVITY: Recognising your current means (reflection)

Look at the diagram of 'means to achieving the goals of positive psychology' (see next page).

Think about which of these you already recognise within your day-to-day life. Are there any that you would like to develop?

EXAMPLE: Bobby was able to practise kindness as a way to better switch off from his stressful work life, but developing other signature strengths in the workplace may reduce or prevent that stress experience.

Here are a few suggested ways of practising positive psychology, according to research by Alan Carr and colleagues in 2021.



Positive psychology in therapy

PPIs can have a beneficial influence on those receiving therapy for mental health issues. Being able to embrace the characteristics of positive psychology, e.g. happiness, engagement, and purpose, is thought to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, and experiences of overwhelming emotions, like anger.

Although the research on this approach is relatively new, the results that do exist are very encouraging and hopefully will convince you to give it a go!

Different settings for using PPIs

- education
- workplace
- parenthood
- marital life
- and beyond...

PPIs have been shown to be most effective ...

- for self-referred people
- in the older population
- in individual therapy with a practitioner
- for those who engaged with it over a long period of time
- for those using a variety of activities/techniques
- for those with a diagnosed mental health condition.

Positive psychology neither seeks to heal from past adversity nor improve current circumstances (altering behaviours), but rather aims to highlight the influence of being positive towards the past, present, and future. PPIs are an effective way to improve wellbeing that are adaptable to various different settings. Because of the person-centred nature of positive psychology, there is not a right or wrong way to approach it.

PPIs can be practised individually or in a group, led by a practitioner either in-person or remotely, or self-led.

PPIs are considered an effective intervention for those waiting or unable to access mental health therapy. They are an available and affordable approach which decreases negative symptoms while also broadly enhancing long-term wellbeing.

PPIs are also seen to influence physical wellbeing!

Research in 2004 saw a connection between PPIs and physical health, in particular the cardiovascular state as an after effect of strong emotions. For example, positive emotional focus caused a decrease in heightened heart rate, blood pressure and vasoconstriction following a negative emotional outburst.

“PPI has been shown to both reduce depression and promote wellbeing and optimal functioning for the general population, mental health groups, and patients suffering from chronic or terminal illnesses.”
Lim & Tierney, 2022

Positive psychology v toxic positivity

Positivity can be beneficial and typically is intended as a good thing. It can enhance individual potential through improving confidence and/or self-esteem and can also improve wellbeing.

However, positivity can also be harmful when delivered in the wrong context. It becomes a bad thing when the positive remark or attitude is forced upon a person or where it disregards their emotional experience. In scenarios where the projection of positivity is ineffective or causes harm, it is described as toxic positivity.

“The assumption, either by oneself or others, that despite a person’s emotional pain or difficult situation, they should only have a positive mindset or positive vibes”

Dr Jamie Zuckerman

Recognising the difference

Example scenario

You express: “I’m having a bad day” and describe how this has left you feeling down and pretty pessimistic.

Your friend responds: “But you have so much to be grateful for.”

Although this response may be intended to remind you of the things in your life that may change your pessimistic outlook, this positive remark can be experienced as being dismissive, failing to validate feelings, and lacking in empathy. Therefore, this is an example of toxic positivity.

Alternative scenario

You express: “I’m having a bad day” and describe how this has left you feeling down and pretty pessimistic.

Your friend responds: “It’s okay to have bad days, I am here for you!”

This response is supportive, empathetic and validates your experience, while encouraging a positive perspective over your experience and is a good example of positivity being used effectively.

Toxic positivity is not always intentional and can be misinterpreted by others. It can be a tricky one to get right at times! However, effective communication and strengthening relationships are skills recognised by positive psychology that can be identified, developed, and promoted to enhance potential and wellbeing.

**Dismissing
of the situation
or emotional
response**

**“It is what
it is”**

**Projecting
‘feel good’
remarks without
considering
feelings**

**“What do you
have to
complain about”**

Red flags of positivity

**“Not worth
losing any
sleep over”**

**“You chose
to sign up
for this”**

**“I know exactly
how you feel.
I had the same...”**

**“Just get on
with it”**

**Blaming or
humiliating a
person over the
situation**

**“Thanks for
putting a downer
on our day!”**

**Sharing a personal
experience in attempt
to relate and placing
the self in the centre
of the conversation
and dismissing others**

Here are some signs of toxic positivity to look out for when developing this skill:

ACTIVITY: Was it toxic?

Think about the power that your words hold. How would you rephrase the examples of toxic positivity below?

Example

Toxic positivity	Genuine positivity
“Being negative won’t help the situation”	“It’s important and healthy to feel these negative emotions. Is there anything I can do to make this easier?”
“Good vibes only”	“I welcome you through all your emotional experiences. Let’s work together on changing those negative ones into better vibes”
“You’ll get over it”	“You are resilient and strong enough to work through it”

Here is some space for you to give it a try

“Other people have it a lot worse”	
“Just look at the bright side of things”	
“I had the same thing happen to me, so I know exactly how you feel”	

Developing optimism

ACTIVITY: What do you read?
HAPPINESS IS NOWHERE

a) Happiness is nowhere b) Happiness is now here

This activity from Robert Holden reflects how the perspective you hold towards life can influence what is seen, and the way it is interpreted.

Answer **A** would suggest a pessimistic outlook, while answer **B** is an optimistic view.

Optimism originates from the Latin term 'optimum' which translates to 'the best'. The phrase is used to describe the hopeful and ambitious outlook a person holds, that primarily seeks the potential for good and positivity around them. As a type of PPI, optimism plays a role in developing resilience, hope, and acceptance of changes that are outside your control.

If you answered A, why not give this activity a try?

ACTIVITY: Three good things for three days

Identify three good things each day. This can boost happiness and encourage a more positive outlook on life. Reflect on three good things for the next three days, then consider going back to the previous activity to see if your outlook has changed?

Optimism can be effective at improving wellbeing and also enhancing a person's potential in various settings.

Optimism in therapy

Optimism can significantly influence your mental health and wellbeing, therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that it is present in many therapeutic settings. Experiences of poor mental health that include a trend of negative thinking and overwhelming distress, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, or bereavement, are instances where optimism can be especially beneficial in therapy. That is because embracing optimism has been found to reduce stress, symptoms of depression, and suicidal ideation while also enhancing resilience and self-esteem.

“Embracing optimism does not make us immune to stress and worries. Optimism teaches us how to see what is going wrong and still be hopeful that it can be turned right.”

M R Chowdhury



Optimism as an everyday habit

Some ways to adopt an optimistic attitude include:

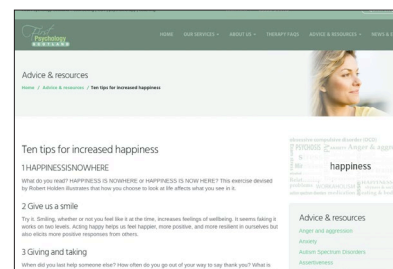
- **Optimistic self-talk** – have regular chats with others and personal check-ins focused on the good parts of the present day.
- **Manage your expectations** – set yourself realistic goals designed around effort and capabilities rather than results.
- **Reflection** – keep a regular record (for example in a daily journal) of your achievements, people or things you are grateful for, and other strengths you have exercised to be your best self.
- **Challenge your inner-critic** – take responsibility for yourself. recognise failures as lessons, and show kindness towards yourself. These are all ways of adapting a pessimistic perspective into a more positive one.

You can find more tips on increasing happiness on the First Psychology website.

Optimism and the role on physical health

- Optimists typically have better health-related behaviours, e.g. better personal hygiene, better fitness levels, etc.
- Researchers predict that optimistic people will live longer.

Regularly chatting to others and sharing your successes, appreciation of things in your life, and things you are looking forward to is a good way to reinforce optimism and positivity.



Case study: the Danish concept of Hygge

Below is an example of how a small change of perspective and routine can result in a cultural development that aligns with the goals of positive psychology – to enhance personal potential and improve wellbeing.

Pronounced as ‘h-oo-g-a’ this Danish concept, best translates as ‘cosiness’. It is an attitude held by most of the Danish population, which has developed to become a significant part of their culture, particularly during the dark, cold, and harsh winter months. It is focused on creating a positive atmosphere to encourage relaxation and enjoyment of the more peaceful pleasures in life, all of which are seen to improve wellbeing and increase happiness.

Imagine yourself sitting beside a log-burning fire on a cold night, cuddling your dog, wearing your favourite pair of fluffy socks, and wrapped in a blanket, while drinking a warm beverage. This image captures what is implied by the Danish concept of hygge.

Hygge does not have to be restricted to the cold season of winter. It is a practice that can improve your wellbeing throughout the year, as the setting and activities of hygge are adaptive. For example, although the setting is typically at home or in another quiet location, you may embrace this attitude during a beach picnic in July, as described below.

Imagine the sound of the waves, a gentle walk collecting seashells, drawing in the sand while breathing in the fresh sea-air. With a basket full of your favourite snacks, enjoy the space for your worries to float away.

Hygge is about allocating time away from your fast-paced life and spending it in a positive atmosphere to encourage relaxation and enjoyment of the more peaceful pleasures in life. The details of where, when, or what that looks like are entirely individual to you.

The United Nations have ranked Denmark as a close second in the world’s happiest country report in 2023. This positivity seen in the Danish population is thought to be influenced by the practice of hygge, which helps to:

- Increase happiness
- Reduce stress levels
- Increase resilience
- Strengthen relationships
- Improve quality of life

Hygge provides a way of enhancing personal potential, improving emotional and physical wellbeing, as well as creating a happier society. It is a prime example of a practice of positive psychology that is effective and accessible for everyone.



“Hygge is an atmosphere, a feeling, a calm energy. It’s relishing in life’s simple pleasures.”

Jill Conyers



Diagram: word bank of character strengths

Signature strengths

A primary principle in positive psychology is identifying, developing, and sustaining more positive character strengths. There is evidence that supports this as an effective way of improving quality of life and decreasing symptoms of depression by directing deliberate attention towards what you do best.

During experiences of poor mental health, identifying these strengths can be difficult. The Values in Action Project (VIA) developed a structure grouping examples of positive traits to the six primary virtues identified through religious and philosophical traditions.

The word bank *above* is a really helpful resource to use when it is proving tricky to identify what counts as a strength, and more so, which ones you have. It may remind you of existing strengths, highlight areas for development, or possibly help you to discover new ones!

“Acting on our strengths can help impact wellbeing in two ways. It can improve how we experience sensations and it can make us more aware of the meaning and purpose in our lives.”

ACTIVITY: Learn your strengths

We understand that it can be challenging to identify your own strengths and potential. We also understand that typically it is easier to see these in a friend. Therefore this activity asks you to sit down with a friend (or by a mirror) and think about which strengths you recognise within the person in front of you. Then swap roles!

Prompts to help

Consider your day-to-day life and the different settings you appear in. Are there any which you would like to develop? Can you list any that are not in the word bank?

Gratitude

Gratitude is globally recognised as a highly valued characteristic for individuals and for those around them. Experiencing and communicating gratitude will differ across cultures, depending on the societal norms and values, however it is mainly felt through emotions.

The experience of gratitude can be described as a feeling of wonder, admiration and appreciation directed towards something or someone (e.g. towards a person for their helpful action or an appreciation for the beauty of nature).

When embracing gratitude, you may recognise a shift of perspective across various aspects of your life, such as areas where it seems like there is nothing to be grateful for or you might begin to recognise life itself as being worthy of thanks. Recognising and expressing gratitude can help identify meaning in your life, which aligns with the goals of positive psychology.

“I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.”

C K Chesterton

ACTIVITY: The gratitude scavenger hunt

Use this activity to help you identify things in your life that you are grateful for. Can you think of/find:

- Something that makes you smile?
- Something you care about (self-care and pets definitely count!)?
- Something you are good at?
- Something you like about nature?
- Something that is useful to you?

Research suggests that in addition to the positive sensation felt from gratitude, it holds potential to contribute to further positivity. Data from a survey completed in America by adults and teenagers in 1998, reflected that more than 90% of participants reported that they felt “extremely [or] somewhat happy” while conveying feelings of gratitude.

The pitfall of instant gratification

Instant gratification can be gained from sources such as smartphones and social media. It describes the immediate satisfaction felt through an entertaining stimulus. However, researchers have also described this as ‘a distraction’ from tasks that do not provide immediate pleasure. Instant gratification is a positive experience, however having an awareness of the ‘downside’ – where it is preventing long-term gratitude – can be beneficial to your wellbeing.

For example, a friend promises to paint a portrait of you to hang in your new home. They take a while as they are fitting it in around their busy life. You feel you can’t wait, so you fill the space with a photograph instead. This gives you immediate gratification, something you have become accustomed to receiving. When you finally receive the portrait, you do not experience the same level of gratitude (long-term gratitude) for the hard work, time, and skill that you would have experienced had you not already received immediate gratification.



Gratification gained from social media, can limit our ability to experience longer term gratitude

This awareness can benefit your wellbeing by adjusting your expectations and recognising any missed long-term opportunities to practise gratitude, which can improve quality of life, personal potential, relationships with others as well as welfare, which aligns with the aims of positive psychology.

These are changes that do not happen overnight or after one trip to the gym, instead they require time, consistency, and practice to recognise the results.

Developing gratitude

Positive psychology promotes gratitude as a character strength that you can develop and use to enhance your quality of life.

But how do you do this? Give this a try... Many cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques are founded and supported by research into enhancing gratitude. For example, 'reframing unhelpful thoughts' (also known as, "catch-it, check-it, change it") is a resource commonly used in everyday life, outside of the therapy room.

“Gratitude has, for many, been replaced by disappointment, anger, and resentment when these expected ‘blessings’ either do not appear or they disappear.”

Passmore & Oades

ACTIVITY:

Below is an example, but think about how you might tackle your own unhelpful thoughts.

Can you find an example in your life to test out this technique?

Step	Description	Example
Catch it	Step one: identify non-grateful thoughts	“I’m so behind. I am not capable of this work.”
Check it	Step two: formulate gratitude-supporting thoughts	“I’m going the best I can.”
Change it	Step three: replace the non-grateful thoughts with the gratitude supporting thoughts.	“I am behind, but it is getting done and I’m doing my best.”
Then, Enhance it	Step four: translate the inner feeling into the outward action. Suggests a person is able to live with greater contentment	“I will communicate this feeling to ease the pressure of being behind and seek feedback to reassure me that I’m doing the correct work and it’s to the expected standard.”

You can find out more about challenging your thoughts in *The CBT Connection*, a free booklet available at www.firstpsychology.co.uk

Ten tips to help you benefit from positive psychology

1. It might feel tough at first and challenging to get into a routine with these new habits. That is okay!! Try to stick with it, surround yourself with support and be kind to yourself.
2. Let go of your need for perfection, switch off that inner critic and set realistic goals.
3. Build positive psychology into your personal routine. Keep it regular, and over time it will feel more natural.
4. Try not to shy away from trying something new.
5. Share your learnings with your peers and practise PPIs together.
6. Be present and savour each positive moment – every achievement is worth a smile.
7. Find some time and a safe place to enjoy your own form of relaxation and peaceful pleasures of life.
8. Get creative with it.
9. Try turning your learning from this booklet into actions, and after a few months, come back to re-do some of the activities. Do you still read HAPPINESSISNOWHERE the same way?
10. Experience it, embrace it, and enjoy it!

References

A full list of references is available at:

www.firstpsychology.co.uk/files/pp-booklet-references.pdf

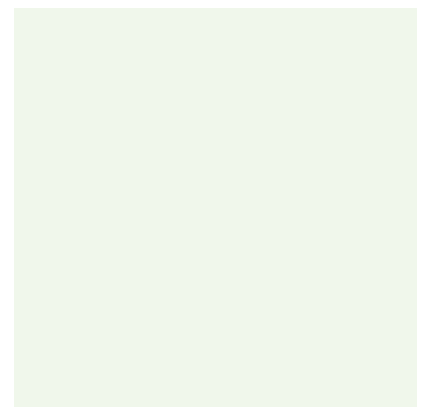
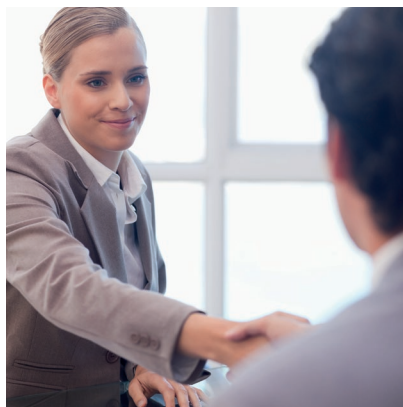
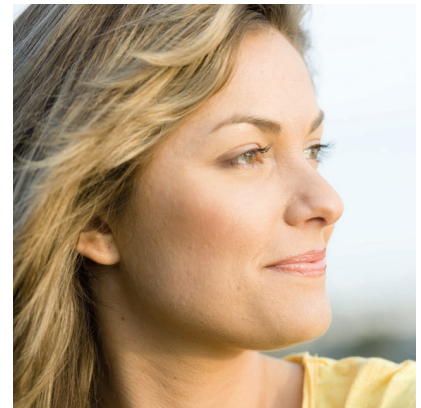
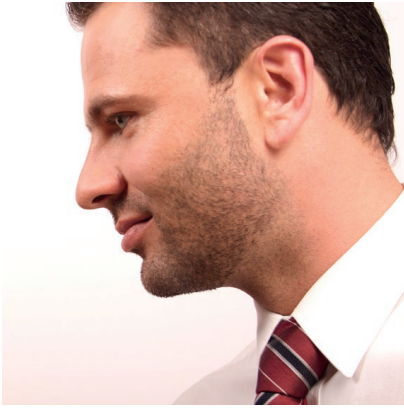


Our highly qualified and experienced team at First Psychology offers a variety of therapy services and works with people with a wide range of issues and problems.

We provide:

- Therapy and coaching services for individuals, couples, children, young people and families.
- Employee counselling, CBT & psychological therapies; wellbeing and personal performance coaching for employers; webinars, workshops, employee events and consultation.

All First Psychology practitioners have excellent qualifications and experience, so you can come to us knowing that you will see an experienced professional.



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First Psychology has centres throughout Scotland and Northern England

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