

What is positive psychology, and how can you use it for yourself?

May 22 2017, by Peggy Kern



All emotions make us human – positive and negative. Credit: andrewscater
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Many people have probably heard the term "positive psychology", but know little about what it means in practice. Positive psychology aims to

find ways to make life better for people, and ensure they're the most mentally healthy person they can be.

Officially established in 1998, positive [psychology](#) is a relative new field. It has quickly become popular among [researchers](#), and blogs about happiness and well-being are now commonplace.

Positive psychology suggests that getting rid of sickness, disability, depression, crime and the other problems of life is important, but not enough. People should be able to not just survive life, but to thrive and enjoy it. Positive interventions are being brought into [schools](#) and [workplaces](#) to help [people](#) feel good and be more productive.

Emphasis on preventing mental health problems

Mental health problems are increasing in Australia. Around 20% of Australia's population is diagnosed with a [mental illness](#), while depression is one of the biggest causes of [disability](#) around the world.

The typical approach for dealing with mental illness is to wait until a person shows signs of disorder, then provide treatment. This is like taking your car to the shop when it stops working. But in the same way a lot of car troubles can be avoided through regular maintenance, positive psychology posits that by proactively taking care of one's [mental health](#), [mental illness](#) can be prevented, or at least be less severe.

By focusing on building a person's internal strengths and helping people recognise and connect with resources around them, such as friends and family, they are better able to deal with challenges and enjoy life as a whole.

One way this prevention model is being put into practice is by teaching students about well-being, resilience, [character strengths](#), emotions,

social relationships, and similar skills.

[Education](#) about trauma nurtures well-being for students from challenging backgrounds. By developing healthy habits early, we hope students will be more resilient in the future – although the long-term impact of such programs is unknown. Some work also applies the ideas of positive psychology to [clinical settings](#) to help treat depression.

Similarly, by regularly engaging in positive activities, you can help build mental fitness and keep yourself mentally healthy.

Some misconceptions

A major misconception is that positive psychology is positive thinking: that if you think good thoughts, they will come about. Although positive psychology suggests being optimistic about the future is beneficial, good things will only happen if you actively do things to make them come about. It's what people [actually do](#) that matters, not simply what they think.

While positive psychology focuses a lot on building positive emotions, such as joy, excitement, contentment and calmness, it doesn't deny the reality of negative emotions and experiences. Emotions are part of what makes us human. However, there is often a natural tendency to focus too much on the negatives of life, so there is value in shifting that focus more to the positive side.

Positive psychology is different from self-help in that it uses techniques based on rigorous psychological research. Different interventions are tested to see whether or not they have an impact.

However, positive psychology is not a silver bullet. Many of the interventions were developed and tested by Americans. These

approaches might not work well for Australians or for people from other cultures and backgrounds.

We're still trying to find out what works best, for whom, and under what conditions. There's still a lot we don't know. So beware of claims about "proven ways" to be happy.

How to practise it yourself

If you want to learn how to practise [positive psychology](#) yourself, numerous activities and tools are available.

It can be useful to get a sense of your own well-being as a starting point. I've developed [a survey](#) that measures your emotions, engagement in life, relationships with others, sense of meaning and purpose, feelings of accomplishment, and physical health. These indicators can give you insight into your well-being in different facets of your life.

Based on this assessment, the survey also offers some activities you can do to start building your well-being. Just like a medical checkup, it can point to areas you might want to work on.

Knowing and [using your strengths](#) also relates to greater well-being. The [Values in Action survey](#) can identify your character strengths, such as creativity, curiosity, leadership, kindness and social intelligence.

You can also actively cultivate the ability to more consistently [shift your focus and perspective](#) in a positive direction. For example, ending each day by noting a few things that went well during the day creates a habit of noticing and appreciating good things that happen. Regularly practising this may help counteract natural biases to ruminate on what went wrong, or worry about tomorrow.

You can also intentionally [add more positive emotions](#) to your everyday life by ensuring that, each day, you take part in simple activities that [make you feel good](#).

Cultivating and nurturing positive relationships is essential for your mental health and well-being. It's important to build and maintain good relationships in as many facets of your [life](#) as possible: this includes your relationships with family members, friends and coworkers.

Making it a habit to thank others for things they do can help build good relationships. Another idea is to do [kind acts for others](#). Such activities will help them feel good, be a better friend to you, and help develop a strong support network.

Positive psychology can benefit people at different stages on the mental health spectrum, but if you are really struggling it's important to get help. Talk to friends, family or your doctor.

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