

Strengthening the positive

Are you a high achiever and want to add more purpose and meaning to your life?

Do you want to thrive, not just survive?

By Gaynor Parkin



POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

(PP) is a relatively new field within the discipline of psychology. Knowledge from PP has been transforming the way we think about well-being, and how we enhance it. Organisations are also paying attention to PP research due to the relationship that has been demonstrated between improved well-being and engagement, and improved productivity.

What is Positive Psychology?

“There are two complementary strategies for improving the human condition. One is to relieve what is negative in life; the other is to strengthen what is positive. Mainstream psychology focuses largely on the first strategy; Positive Psychology emphasises the second” – Martin Seligman.

“Positive psychology is the scientific study of what enables individuals and communities to thrive” – International Positive Psychology Association.

The field of positive psychology was founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work and play.

PP began at the University of Pennsylvania in 1998, when Martin E P Seligman, then a Penn professor and President of the American Psychological Association, made the study of positive emotion the theme of his tenure and developed a master’s programme for its study.

PP caught both academic and popular attention, with Penn remaining the locus.

Contrary to what some media have portrayed over this time, PP is **not** the science of happiness.

Rather, it is the science of all that goes right, rather than wrong, with people. This does, of course, include happiness, but

more than that. It encompasses resilience, perseverance, courage, optimism, curiosity and a broad range of other positive topics.

PP is an applied science: from a strong evidence base it informs practical intervention tools and strategies to improve both well-being and performance.

This evidence base has included a sometimes controversial use of brain-scanning technology that has measured and refined what is happening inside people’s brains, as well as understanding emotions, thoughts and behaviours.

PP is also highly workplace relevant because it is fundamentally about high performance, and how to get the best from people.

Clever studies have looked at how much an upbeat mood reduces the time it takes a team of doctors to make a tricky diagnosis, and that a social worker will make twice as many visits to clients if he or she feels appreciated.

The time pressure to meet billable hours targets has made conducting specific research with lawyers a challenge, but Martin Seligman’s work has shown how improving optimistic thinking is helpful for lawyers to bounce back from setbacks.

What are some of the highlights of the research knowledge from PP and how can we put this into practice in our everyday life and work?

Use your strengths

Described as “character strengths”, these are internal strengths – doing what we are best at naturally. One of the immediate benefits of using strengths is that it will feel effortless, and enjoyable. Carrying out tasks and activities that provide us with opportunities to use our strengths has been shown to have a number of other benefits.

These include greater self-esteem when

Your clients will thank
you for helping
them make a bequest.

Let’s work together to increase bequest
income for the benefit of all New Zealand charities
and their communities.

include a charity
Help the work live on.



www.includeacharity.org.nz

using strengths, improved engagement, better performance and a stronger sense of intrinsic motivation.

The more we use our “signature strengths” – our top strengths – the better. A recent study found that employees who used four or more of their signature strengths had more positive work experiences and greater work-as-a-calling than those who expressed fewer than four. There are also significant benefits from many people using strengths at an organisational level.

Thirty years of Gallup surveys have found that the most successful companies are ones whose employees believe they get to do what they do best every day.

With one New Zealand Company we are working with a simple analysis of individual strengths and the mix of strengths in teams helped everyone work out the most productive uses of their time.

To find out your Character Strengths take the free VIA Signature Strengths questionnaire: www.viacharacter.org/Survey/Account/Register.

Once you have identified your strengths look at how many you are using every day. Can you create more opportunities to use them more often or to use a greater number of your strengths? Would it be helpful for your team to take the strengths test also and match strengths to tasks?

Create more positive emotion

A strong body of research data has demonstrated that experiencing more positive emotion is linked with both improved performance and enhanced well-being.

The mechanism for how this works is both neurochemical and physiological: experiencing positive emotions like joy, hope, achievement, satisfaction and gratitude signal to our bodies and brains that a stress state is not required and takes us instead into a calm, optimum zone.

Professor Barbara Fredrickson (Kenan Distinguished Professor at the University of North Carolina) is a leading researcher in this field. She has described the transformation powers of positive emotions as the “broaden and build” phenomena.

Her studies have shown that experiencing more positive emotion broadens the scope of attention and cognition, and therefore the behavioural options that are available to us. This research explains why we are more likely to be creative when we are in a positive mood, are more innovative and perform better.

Fredrickson’s research has also demonstrated that teams are likely to perform

better when team members experience a higher ratio of positive to negative emotions.

A practical finding from this research is that the intensity of the emotion – how strong the feeling feels – does not determine the benefits. Rather, it is the frequency of experiencing positive emotions – how often you have a good feeling – that matters.

Sharing a joke with a colleague, taking 10 minutes to enjoy the quiz with your team, celebrating a small win or saying thanks to your admin support are all short but effective positive emotion boosts during the day. Importantly, as well as creating individual benefits, more positive emotion in teams has been shown in a number of studies to lead directly to better team work, better customer evaluations and better organisational citizenship behaviors.

How else might you start to put this knowledge into practice?

Pay attention to when you do experience positive emotion at work – who were you with? What were you doing? Then plan how you can have more of these experiences more often.

Other strategies for increasing positive emotion include practising gratitude and savouring:

Gratitude

Gratitude is simply noticing and expressing things (people, experiences, opportunities) we are grateful and thankful for.

When we feel gratitude we benefit from

the pleasant memory of a positive event in our life. And when we express gratitude to others, we strengthen our relationship with them.

Keeping a regular gratitude journal is one strategy that has been found to be effective at helping us to keep track of what we are grateful for, and to boost our experience of positive emotion.

Try writing down three things once a week that you are grateful for and notice the benefit to your mood.

Savouring

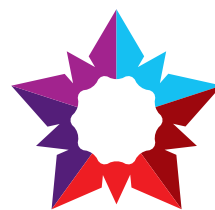
Savouring is another very effective way to boost our experience of positive emotions.

Savouring can be spontaneous – we celebrate something at the time it happens, perhaps a success with a client by sharing the news with a friend. Or we can consciously choose to do something to create or continue a good experience – plan a celebration with colleagues.

Bridget Grenville-Cleave is a leading researcher in this field. She suggests what helps us savour is slowing down and focusing attention to all our senses (touch, taste, sight, hearing and smell). By being present, and keeping focused on what we are doing this helps to stretch out the experience and notice our enjoyment.

Experience more flow

The idea of “flow” has been around for some time but has attracted more attention recently as information from neuroscience studies



claro

NZ's Health Sector Lawyers

Claro is delighted to announce that Jonathan Coates has been joined in partnership by Anita Miller and Iris Reuvecamp.

Auckland: 09 557 0357 • Wellington: 04 550 5357 • Christchurch: 03 550 0500

www.clarolaw.co.nz

adds some scientific weight to the concept.

Flow is a state where time seems to either fly by, or slow down, and we feel like we're completely "in the zone."

Hungarian Psychologist Michaly Csikszentmihalyi first described flow as the state we experience when our concentration is high, we experience deep satisfaction, we stop feeling self-conscious (or self-critical) and we don't notice time. You may have experienced flow when you are completely absorbed in a hobby you enjoy, or a satisfying project at work.

Experiencing flow is beneficial to our well-being because it produces positive emotions. Experiencing flow also helps us to persist with challenging tasks, which in turn leads to the further development of skills.

Csikszentmihalyi suggested that one of the best ways to bring about flow is to match the challenge of the activity we are doing to our level of skill. Easier said than done and this takes ongoing adjustment because our skills keep changing, but the aim is for balance between challenge and skill.

Flow also becomes more likely when we get frequent feedback so that we can see progress and adjust what we are doing.

Boost your flow – try this exercise

Take five minutes to think and write down all of the things you have done for the past few days or week. These might include work, spending time with friends or family, leisure activities, sport or some kind of community involvement.

Think about and write down in which of these activities you have experienced flow.

With large activities like work there may be some aspects where you experience flow and not others. For example, you may experience flow when you are working on a strategic project or as part of a team.

Once you have an idea make a plan for how you can repeat some of your favourite flow activities over the next week.

You can make a note of how you feel afterwards to see if your predictions are accurate or if you may want to experiment with other activities to boost flow.

Other strategies to experience more flow

1. Control your attention. Minimise distractions and focus on your task, whatever it might be. If your mind wanders, bring it back to the task.
2. Manage the balance between skill and challenge.
 - If the task is too easy, find ways to make

it more challenging, for example by doing it more quickly (or more slowly) than normal.

- To transform otherwise dull low skill/low challenge activities like sitting in a waiting room, create 'micro-flow' experiences with specific rules and goals. You could try solving puzzles in your head or recalling phrases from a poem or foreign language.
 - If the task is too challenging, find ways to up your skill level. You could look for additional training, coaching or mentoring. Or you could break the task down into smaller steps, which are more achievable. Or find ways to apply your top strengths to help you achieve it.
3. To achieve flow in conversation, focus intently on the other person and actively listen to what they are saying. Ask questions and allow plenty of time.
 4. Finally, seek feedback on your performance on tasks and act on it.

Have a go and experiment

The best way to find out which of these tools from PP are most effective for you is to try them out. You may want to make a note of how you are feeling before you try one of them, and how you feel after. Is there a difference?

By conducting your own experiments you are likely to notice patterns and this information may then help you decide which strategies you continue to practise.

For more information about PP go to The New Zealand Association of Positive Psychology website: www.positivepsychology.org.nz.

Gaynor Parkin has worked for two decades as a clinical psychologist in New Zealand and the United Kingdom. She is the founding director of Umbrella, which provides workplace resilience training for a broad range of public and private sector organisations. Gaynor also lectures for the Psychology Department at Victoria University. Gaynor is the co-author of the book I've had it up to here: from stress to strength, published by Consumer NZ in 2008 and reprinted in 2011. Gaynor tests out the robustness of resilience tools when juggling her psychology work with the joys and challenges of parenting twin boys.

References

- Harzer, C., & Ruch, W. (2012). When the job is a calling: The role of applying one's signature strengths at work. *Journal of Positive Psychology*.
- Harzer, C., & Ruch, W. (2012). The application of signature character strengths and positive experiences at work. *Journal of Happiness Studies*.
- Littman-Ovadia, H., & Davidovitch, N. (2010). Effects of congruence and character-strength deployment on work adjustment and well-being. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 1 (3), 138-146.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*. New York: Free Press. London: Nicolas Brealey Publishing.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Seligman, M. E. P.; Verkuil, P. R., & Kang, T.H. (2005). Why Lawyers are Unhappy. *Deakin Law Review*, 49, 10(1).
- Tugdale, M. & Fredrickson, B.L. (2004). Resilient individuals use positive emotions to bounce back from negative emotional arousal. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 86, 320-33.
- Tugade, M.M., Fredrickson, B.L. & Barrett, L.F. (2004). Psychological Resilience and Positive Emotional Granularity; Explaining the Benefits of Positive Emotions on Coping and health. *Journal of Personality*, 72, 6, 1161-1190.



DX OVERNIGHT

Join our DX Overnight Box-to-Box exchange service this month and receive a **free box for your first year!**

Benefit from **overnight** mail services within the DX Box network, with over 290 exchange or drop boxes nationwide.

- Significant cost savings
- Closed and private network
- Tracking of important items
- Mail delivered before 9:30am Mon - Fri

Conditions apply
Contact us today to find out more
0800 800 230 | www.dxmail.co.nz