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SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

11 DAILY DIARY ACTIVITY

For this activity, we would like you to create a diary for 5 consecutive days. The idea is to take about 5 minutes each day and write down at least three positive things in your life. For instance, it can be the good things that happened that day, what you have to be thankful for, or how you feel about the people who care about you. Put something positive in your diary every day. There are also interventions in positive psychology that involve writing to deal with negative emotions, but let's stick with the positive for this activity.

Because happiness is partially a result of how people interpret events, try to find something every day that you can interpret in a positive way. That is, find a positive way to look at what happened. Of course, at times your list of three good things will include experiences that were just simply good ones, experiences where no interpretation was necessary; these just felt good. Among the challenges of pursuing greater well-being is that our negative emotions often have a greater pull on us than our positive emotions. Negative emotions often seem to demand our attention and can yank us out of a good mood very quickly. From an evolutionary perspective, this situation makes sense. Why? Because in our evolutionary past, it was more important to notice threats as quickly as possible than to bask in pleasant feelings. Therefore, scientists believe, we evolved to be more sensitive to negative emotions that might signal a threat. However, this evolutionary tendency can be overcome with just a little practice. The idea is to start training yourself to notice the positive aspects of your life, while not ignoring the potential threats.

Many people find it helpful to do their writing about the three good things at the end of the day. You may write down your three good things just before going to bed. You may find this puts you into a good mood right before you go to sleep. It may even give you more uplifting dreams!

At the end of 5 days, review what you wrote and write a brief description of how you feel or how the activity did or didn't enhance your well-being. You may find it helpful to have a friend or relative also conduct this activity at the same time as you. Then at the end of the 5 days, you can share what you each experienced and how the activity impacted you both.

In positive psychology, this endeavor is known as the "Three Good Things" activity. To explore research on it, you can look at Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005).

13 NOSTALGIA

If various songs or scents easily put you into a sentimental mood, don't feel embarrassed—for positive psychology shows that nostalgia isn't merely harmless; it's actually beneficial for individual well-being. It also seems that the more emotionally healthy we are, the likelier we are to become nostalgic often.

Nostalgia hasn't always been viewed this way. The word comes from ancient Greek, combining *nostos* (to return home) and *algos* (referring to pain) and was created in 1688 by a Swiss physician who discussed it in his medical treatise. He used *nostalgia* to describe the emotional distress of Swiss soldiers stationed far from home. For centuries afterward, nostalgia had a medical, and basically abnormal, connotation linked to homesickness.

Then, in the 1950s, experts began changing their view. They no longer saw nostalgia as a type of homesickness but instead as a pleasant self-indulgence about the past. Undoubtedly, this shift related to the enormous impact of TV, whose popular shows celebrated the American Old West and traditional farm life. It's no surprise that Baby Boomers—raised on such entertaining fare—were the first generation to grow up with nostalgia as desirable.

Today, positive psychology has shed increasing light on how nostalgia strengthens mental health. A research team led by Dr. Xinyue Zhou (2008) in China found that nostalgia helped people to feel more connected with family and friends, thereby reducing feelings of loneliness. These findings were consistent with an earlier study led by Dr. Tim Wildschut (2006) at the University of Southampton in England. Both researchers asserted that people with high resilience—that is, the ability to bounce back quickly from stress—are skillful in using nostalgia to uplift their mood. Of course, overly focusing on past memories can prevent us from living fully in the present, but in moderation, nostalgia can enhance our sense of closeness to others.

In this activity, interview two people over the age of 40 who frequently listen to “oldies” pop music, such as on YouTube. For both persons, your interview may include these questions: In general, why do you like to listen to pop songs from earlier eras? Is it mainly because of the memories these songs evoke, their musical styles, or both reasons? Are particular “oldies” songs associated with specific events, such as high school graduation, a college romance, or a vacation? If so, could you give two examples of particular songs that make you feel nostalgic in a specific way? Overall, would you describe nostalgia as a happy emotion, a somewhat sad emotion, or a mixture of both—and why?

Record your interview answers below.

Your Work: Please use this space, and additional journal space as appropriate, for your work.

14 EXPLANATORY STYLE

It's a truism that life is filled with ups and downs. Disappointments happen to everybody—even to the most successful people. Reacting to wonderful events is not difficult: Most of us know how to celebrate. But responding effectively to defeat and failure is a different matter. Thus, among the most important concepts in positive psychology today is that of *explanatory style*: how we interpret bad events that occur in our lives. Research shows that it has major consequences for our mental and even physical health.

A leading figure in explicating the value of an optimistic explanatory style is Dr. Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania. During the mid-1980s, he studied the explanatory style of Major League Baseball (MLB) players and managers. By analyzing the public utterances reported in local newspapers, he found that “optimistic teams” performed better than their previous win–loss records would have predicted and that “pessimistic teams” actually performed worse. During the same period, his study involving the National Basketball Association (NBA) reported similar findings: There was an individual as well as a team explanatory style that could be measured—and it too predicted winning above and beyond sheer athletic ability (Seligman, 1991).

In a follow-up study, Dr. Seligman and his colleagues found that a pessimistic explanatory style was a major risk factor for physical illness. Using physical and mental health data of Harvard classmates during World War II, researchers were able to retrospectively determine that explanatory style impacted college students' later health from ages 30 to 60. Those who were pessimistic as young adults were significantly more likely to have poor health when older compared to those with a “sunny” outlook (Seligman, 1991).

In Dr. Seligman view, explanatory style comprises three distinct aspects: *Permanence*. Does one believe that the distressing situation will always exist or will be only temporary? *Pervasiveness*. Does one view the unpleasant situation as all-encompassing or specific in nature? *Personalization*. Does one blame oneself entirely for a bad event or spread the blame to others?

In this activity, describe an experience that turned out badly for you—perhaps a college course or job, a friendship or romantic fling—and for which you have often blamed yourself. Write a paragraph below about the debacle, then deliberately change your explanatory style. First, recognize by writing your new awareness that the event happened and is over; it no longer exists. Second, do so by writing about how the event involved only a portion of your life. Last, do so by writing about how it was not totally your fault by identifying a person or circumstance that was also responsible.

Your Work: Please use this space, and additional journal space as appropriate, for your work.

15 TIME AFFLUENCE

“We all have all the time there is,” observed Eleanor Roosevelt, America’s most popular First Lady, in *You Learn by Living*. “No one can tell you how to use your time. It is yours.” Published in 1960, her book of advice for youth marked an era when 2-hour workday lunches were common—and futurists worried about how Americans would use their huge anticipated leisure in coming decades. Thanks to increasing automation, most social scientists were sure that employment pressures and household drudgery would lessen greatly—allowing almost everybody a feast of recreational opportunities.

Fast-forward to today—and this prediction seem laughable. Although belief in a society with immense leisure just around the corner remained dominant for another few decades, experts eventually altered their view. Among the first social scientists to measure the problem was Dr. Leslie Perlow at Harvard University—and her term *time famine* quickly caught on professionally. Studying a team of software engineers who constantly felt they had too much to do and not enough time do it, Perlow (1999) argued that corporations were crippling their workers’ productivity by putting them in “fast-paced, high-pressure, and crisis-filled” settings. More recently, psychologists Drs. Tim Kasser and Kenneth Sheldon (2009) developed the concept of *time affluence*—that is, the sense that one regularly has ample time at hand. Their research showed that even after controlling for material wealth, one’s experience of time affluence was linked to greater happiness. Intriguingly, too, people who reported close relationships generally had more time affluence than others. The researchers concluded that the sense of time affluence was not only beneficial to physical health and social involvements but also to emotional well-being.

Expanding on such work, an experimental study at the Wharton School of Business found that—seemingly paradoxically—our sense of time affluence *increases* when we spend time helping others. How is this possible? In their view, it is because altruistic behavior boosts our self-esteem and self-confidence—and this development, in turn, stretches out time in our minds. Thus, we become more likely to commit to future engagements, despite our busy schedules.

To enhance your sense of time affluence, keep a journal daily for a week and note on a three-point scale (1 = very little; 2 = a moderate amount; 3 = a large amount) how time affluent you felt *before* performing a volunteer activity for a family member, friend, or your larger community and then *after* you did it. Was there usually a difference in each before-and-after score? Remember, the less you hoard your time, the more plentiful it will appear in your daily life.

Record your results below.

Your Work: Please use this space, and additional journal space as appropriate, for your work.
