

Accentuate the Positive Update

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In previous articles, I wrote about tracking down scientific efforts to explore the effect of positive psychology. At the time I said something about "pending studies." Well, some results are now in. And these results can provide tools for those of us trying to accentuate the positive in order to reap its benefits. What benefits? Perhaps the two most important to us are that studies have shown that people with positive affect (that's psych-speak for happy/optimistic) can increase their creativity *and* they live longer.

In a report titled "Happiness Interventions That Work: The First Results" Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D. (one of the leaders of positive psychology, past president of the APA and a psychology professor at Penn) reports on research he has done with Tracy Steen, Ph.D.

The research, designed to test what they call "Happiness Interventions," used the random assignment placebo controlled test (RCT), in which random assignment determined a volunteer's assignment to one of five interventions being tested or to the control (placebo). Seligman notes that this was the method used to validate Valium and Prozac, as well as cognitive therapy and systematic desensitization.

Using established emotional state assessment they tested 576 volunteers before each was assigned one of six interventions (including the control placebo). They are then re-tested at specific intervals after they have used the intervention for one week.

Here are the six interventions volunteers were assigned to:

Intervention 1: The Gratitude Visit

Write and present a letter of gratitude to someone the volunteer had never properly thanked.

Intervention 2: Three Good Things

Write three good things (big or small) that happened that day each night for one week. For each thing listed, write about why this good thing happened.

Intervention 3: You at Your Best

Write about a time when the volunteer was at his or her best. During the week, examine what personal strengths were used in that "at your best" time and how to use those strengths in other areas.

Intervention 4: Top Strengths

Take the Values in Action Signature Strengths Survey (www.authentic happiness.com), write top five strengths, and "use these strengths more often and in new ways."

Intervention 5: Using Your Top Strengths

Expanding on No. 4: After learning top five strengths, volunteers received detailed instruction on how to use the strengths in new ways. They were asked to

use their strengths in new ways every day for one week.

Intervention 6: Placebo

Write an early memory every night before bed for one week.

Now, here's what we really want to know - what worked and what didn't. The placebo (No. 6) and simply finding out strengths (No. 4) gave volunteers a quick happiness boost, but they quickly reverted to previous emotional states. Writing the story of you at your best (No. 3) showed benefits for two weeks before slipping back.

But the other three showed longer benefits. Volunteers assigned to the Gratitude Visit (No. 1) intervention tested as significantly happier and less depressed for a solid month after the one-week trial.

The big winners, though, were Three Good Things (No. 2) and Using Your Top Strengths (No. 5). Volunteers who had used either of those for one week were still testing as significantly happier and less depressed three months later. That's as long as they've studied them so far, so benefits could last even longer.

My practical side notes that No. 5 calls for detailed instructions on how to use those strengths in new ways, which first requires finding someone to give you those detailed instructions (and most likely paying that someone) and then having to do the work of actually using those strengths in new ways. Hmmm.

But Three Good Things is easy, free (we all have paper and pens lying around, right?) and, hey, we only have to do it for a week once every three months to have the benefits! Okay, I doubt the Ph.D.s would agree with me on that, but it makes sense to me.

Stay tuned ... this and other studies continue.