

Program - Positive Psychology

Susanna Willingham and Diana Kriz



Early in this session on how a positive attitude can impact our lives, Susanna asked, “Did you ever notice that there are people who manage to stay positive despite severe hardships?” She went on to note that we cannot control the stresses, the sadness, or the trauma that we experience. But we can build habits and life practices that help us to be more flexible and better able to adapt to changes that inevitably will happen as we age.

Susanna then led the group in that full, open smiling when your eyes crinkle and your cheeks round with a full smile know as “smizing,” smiling with your eyes. Our facial muscles create stimuli in the brain that tends to make us think positive thoughts!

Negative thinking can become habit forming. But as you purposely engage in more positive emotions, you form new neural pathways and habits that lead to more positive thinking and cultivate calm, resilience, flexibility, health and happiness.

Diana spoke about the impact of “learned optimism” on her own life, and related the story of how the political journalist / author / Saturday Evening Post Editor Norman Cousins actually transformed his life when he was faced with a life threatening disease called degenerative collagen illness. Cousins wrote, “I made the joyous discovery that 10 minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep.”

Psychologist Martin Seligman wrote about “learned optimism.” He did extensive research about depression and “learned helplessness.” His foundational research focused on puppies who gave up after being conditioned to stop trying to escape a difficult situation. Based on his experiments, Seligman reasoned that if negative conditioning is possible, then positive conditioning might also be possible.

We can take steps to change our outlook from passive to active, from negative to positive. One suggestion: Get into the habit of taking a few moments each day to write down five things you’re grateful for. And then practice gratitude journaling daily for the next 21 days, and see what a difference it makes.

Below are a few simple but helpful practices to help lift your spirits. If you want to get in the habit of doing these, Susanna noted some sources say it takes at least 21 days to establish a habit and 72 hours to lose it. So to make these into new positive habits, stick with them!

- **Smile more.** In the mirror, at folks on the street, when you are happy. Post a note to remind you or make a frequently used password contain (something like) “smile now...”
- **Give some thought to what it is that makes you feel good** (and if you like, shout it out). It’s important to make something pleasurable be part of every day – and to savor that, e.g., take a walk by the river, meet a friend for a yoga class, go out for a nice lunch
- **Engage fully in whatever you do** – i.e., give up multitasking, learn to meditate, practice mindfulness. Set your intention to do something you enjoy so much that you lose track of time, and just do it! When you are fully engaged, you experience a sense of flow.
- **Get involved in something outside yourself**, something that gives your life meaning, e.g., volunteer, take up a cause you believe in, participate in or host a CAN potluck or small group.
- **Practice gratitude daily.** Morning or night, find a time that works best for you and try to commit to that. Start by listing 5 things you’re grateful for every day; small things count – the morning glories you notice on a morning walk, a friendly puppy, a beautiful sunset.

If you were not able to be at the meeting to enjoy this program and get your own "gratitude journal," we will have some available at the next meeting.

Positive Psychology – A Few Resources

Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, Illness. Kabat-Zinn, John, Thich Nhat Hanh, Joan Borysenko. Delta: Reprint Edition, 1990

Norman Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness: As Perceived by the Patient, Twentieth Anniversary Edition*, W.W. Norton, 2005 (originally published in 1979).

Don Colburn, “Norman Cousins, Still Laughing,” *The Washington Post*, October 21, 1986,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/wellness/1986/10/21/norman-cousins-still-laughing/e17f23cb-3e8c-4f58-b907-2dcd00326e22/?noredirect=on>

Thich Nhat Hahn, *The Miracle of Mindfulness, A Manual on Meditation*, Beacon Press, 1975

Heart Math, <https://www.heartmath.com/> (exercise of smiling at innocent loved person or scene or object)

Journal of Happiness Studies <https://link.springer.com/journal/10902>

Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*, Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, New York: 2006. (Originally published in 1990, but the preface to this edition explains how this foundational work led to Seligman's later expansion of his theories on happiness.)

“Positive Psychology: Harnessing the power of happiness, mindfulness, and inner strength,” *A Harvard Medical School Special Health Report*; Ronald D. Siegel, Medical Editor, 2019.

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/search?q=Positive+psychology+in+practice>.

For a highly simplified, but balanced, description of Martin Seligman's seminal experiments with puppies, watch this YouTube video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hHNq45rEnU> or this one:

<https://youtu.be/6tN9wMbdqZU>