

HAPPY HABITS FOR HARD TIMES

HOW TO APPLY EVIDENCE-BASED HAPPINESS INTERVENTIONS TO YOURSELF AND YOUR
STUDENTS

JOHN SOMMERS-FLANAGAN

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

JOHNSOMMERSFLANAGAN.COM



TO START ... JUST FEEL THIS ...



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Objective 1: Define and describe the significance of happiness as the Aristotelian concept of eudaimonia

Objective 2: Identify and describe six evidence-based strategies that school psychologists can apply to themselves and with their students

Objective 3: Articulate the natural human obstacles to happiness and well-being

LEARNING PROCESS

- We are distant, but can still be engaged
- I describe positive psychology interventions (chat comments)
- You imagine enacting them – or volunteer to role play with me
- We nurture our experimental or “scientific” mindsets by thinking: “Which of these can I weave into my life ... Or my students’ lives?”
- You take-away new (or old) ideas and skills

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Keep yourself engaged and actively participate
- Be open to experiences – yes, that means volunteering!
- Communicate respectfully

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

- Psychology has a history of looking at what's wrong with people. We do psychiatric and learning diagnoses and focus on the negative.
- This changed around 1998, with a movement toward positive psychology
- The question and focus of much psychological research is now on what strengthens people, what makes them emotionally healthy and well?
- Seligman and others created evidence-based happiness/well-being activities

DEFINING HAPPINESS

- True confessions: I'm not just talking about smiley hedonistic (material) happiness ... That won't last because of hedonic adaptation ... and emotional opponent process theory



DEFINING HAPPINESS – 2

- **Hedonic adaptation**: Your new car (or house or boyfriend or award or facelift gets old and you want more)
- **Emotional opponent process theory**: What goes up, must come down; and what goes down, must come up



DEFINING HAPPINESS – 3

I'm talking about **eudaimonic happiness** that involves living well physically, psychologically, socially, spiritually, emotionally, and more



FOUR BIG PRINCIPLES

#1: Nothing works for everyone (even EBTs)

#2: Pick a tool or intervention and practice with an experimental mindset

#3: Build on your strengths and past successes

#4: Focus on your or your client/students' goals

- Mindfulness?, Calmness (or anxiety reduction)?, Sleep better?, Improve mood? Greater satisfaction with life?

LET'S EXPERIENCE HAPPINESS



STRATEGY #1: THREE GOOD THINGS

- Going to bed [Survey]
- Write down (or think about) three good things that happened during the day
- Then track down in your mind “Why” those things happened

NIGHTTIME COGNITIONS AND EMOTIONS



DEMONSTRATION #1

- Volunteer – Three Good Things
- Plan:
 - We talk and simultaneously engage in a self-awareness (self-reflection) process
 - We debrief and take questions



WHY DOES THREE GOOD THINGS WORK?

- When you go to bed, you inevitably and **NATURALLY** embark on either a negative (depressive) review or anticipatory (anxiety) preview
- Thinking three good things shifts you partway
- Identifying “Why” those things happened activates a brain search toward positivity and empowerment

THE ATTENTION FOCUS TUG OF WAR



STRATEGY #2: ATTENTION TRAINING AND ATTENTION CONTROL

- Attention control (aka mindfulness) nearly always fails; this failure is another natural obstacle to eudaimonic happiness
- But Harvard study (n = 2,000+) paying attention to what you're doing increases happiness ratings (JKZ)
- The amazing brain – Now

ACTIVITY

- Everyone
- Two minutes
- Begin at 1 and mentally count your “out” breaths
- If you lose track, start back at 1
- Be mindfully non-judgmental of losing track

MINDFULNESS TRICKS

- The mind is a yapping dog – Give it a bone – Mantra
- Balance how much you care about being mindful with not caring AT ALL about being mindful
- Extend your outbreath (**or use a soothing object**) to engage the parasympathetic nervous system (and be less mentally jumpy)
- Practice. But remember, practice DOES NOT make perfect

STRATEGY #3: SAVORING

- What is savoring?
- Deliberate effort to extend and expand positive experiences [improves mood; increases satisfaction]
 - Track/review fun
 - Track/review meaning
 - Your next run

THE OPPOSITE OF SAVORING

- We often dampen or spoil good experiences, while savoring or chewing on our mistakes
- Anybody ever get stuck chewing on the negative or spoiling the positives? [Yet another natural obstacle to happiness]

EASIER SAVORING

- Mutual savoring
- Find a friend – Remember when ...
 - Improves mood and hope
 - Improves likelihood of repeating
 - Increases planning

STRATEGY #4: DEALING WITH TRIGGERS

- You will get emotionally triggered and upset. Accept that as a part of life.
- But you can make an emotion trigger response plan (How do you WANT to deal with the triggers? Self-regulation coping skills)
- You can also use distraction – temporarily, not habitually

COPING WITH SOCIAL COMPARISON

- “Compare and Despair” [This is one type of trigger]
- Social comparison can become an unconscious, conscious, and malignant process, creating depression, anxiety, and despair
- But how do we stop??

ACTIVITY

- How to play
- One person asks the other person the same question 10 times
- You ask: “What’s Good About You?” You repeat back the answer and write it down. You say “Thank-you.” And you ask: “What’s Good About You?”
- Pair up in break-out “rooms.” Do the activity. Come back and debrief or debrief and come back [8 minutes] . . . Ready, set, go

ACTIVITY – DEBRIEF

- Create a self-regulation reminder card
- Keep it somewhere
- Problems and alternatives

BACK TO SOCIAL COMPARISON

- Happy people tend to do less social comparison and when they do, they notice comparisons, but quickly let go of caring very much. What do they do instead?
- They lean hard toward internal self-evaluation

RESPONDING TO TRIGGERS

- Make an activation plan
- You can use distraction – temporarily, not habitually
- You can pull out your self-regulation reminder card
[Where do you keep it?]

STRATEGY #5: GRATITUDE

- Do you want to increase optimism, improve life satisfaction, be healthier, and exercise more?
- Weave intentional gratitude into your life





GRATITUDE – PART 2

- But the mind is built to count up hassles rather than blessings
- “My two years of rejections”
 - ✓ There had been many
 - ✓ But there had also been much more
 - ✓ This was like counting cloudy days – the outcome is easy

GRATITUDE – PART 3

- Write a **postcard or letter or email or text or IM** of gratitude to a person you value
- Even better: Tell the person directly
- Results?? Not about the response.

ACTIVITY

- Gratitude talk time [Talk to yourself ... Jot down ideas]
 - Who would you express gratitude toward?
 - How would you do it?
 - Can you drop all expectations of how the person should respond?



ACTIVITY - DEBRIEF

- How was it to plan some gratitude?



STRATEGY #6: YOUR BEST SELF

- For those of you who like to write, one researcher invented the Best Possible Self activity.
- If you write about specific positive things that you want in your future, people tend to feel more hopeful and satisfied with life

BONUS: SPIRITUAL/CULTURAL ROADS TO WELL-BEING

- Active pursuit of meaning
 - But it's so easy to watch television and play on Instagram
- Regular involvement in spiritual, religious, or social justice groups
 - But staying home can feel good in the moment

BONUS SLIDE: ASSIGNING HOMEWORK

- Describe and explain the procedure or intervention
- Make sure that it's logically or emotionally linked to your goals or your client's goals
- Ask for feedback and permission to try it
- Try it
- Monitor how it went and get feedback to tweak or change

ONE LAST POSITIVE DISTRACTION

- Social comparison is a pain
- Emotions are a pain 😊
- Finding methods to deal with social comparison and manage emotions is part of positive psychology and wellness
- What songs help you feel your feelings?
- What songs help boost your mood?

STUNNING CONCLUSIONS

- Well-being (eudemonic happiness) requires (at least) awareness, intention, effort, reminders, and persistence
- Most of us forget to apply these unless we have a reminder plan
- Work with students (and yourselves) to select and practice a few evidence-based positive psychology interventions and then see what happens
- What would you like to remember and apply?

RESOURCES

- Greater Good Magazine: <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/>
- Happy Habits for Hard Times Series:
https://coehs.umt.edu/happy_habits_series_2020/default.php
- <https://johnsommersflanagan.com/>