

POSITIVE EMOTIONS BUILD RESILIENCE

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Know that joy is rarer, more difficult, and more beautiful than sadness. Once you make this all-important discovery, you must embrace joy as a moral obligation. – Andre Gide

RESEARCH

Research shows: cultivating positive emotions is not at all selfish or a flight in to Pollyanna. Folks who deliberately cultivate happiness in the flavors of joy, contentment, love, awe are more creative and productive, more flexible and resilient, more charitable and more cooperative, are healthier and live longer than folks who don't. Positive emotions play a key role in building resilience and bouncing back from the terrible. The research shows: positive emotions have a cause and effect relationship to resilience, not just correlation. Positive emotions are not simply a reflection of resilience – the capacity to re-bounce from setbacks. Positive emotions produce resilience.

This presentation explores 20 years of research that provides the science fueling the positive psychology movement and the role of positivity in therapy. Positive emotions not only change our mood but change perspectives, change behaviors, build skills, open us to creativity, collaboration, fulfillment and flourishing - all great supports of strengthening our resilience.

Researchers – Barbara Frederickson, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Dacher Keltner, and others - are all very careful to bow to the inevitability, even the necessity, of “negative” emotions. All of our emotions are signals - something important is happening, pay attention! Emotions are the body-brain's way of giving us information, of connecting to and understanding our experience, of connecting to and understanding another's experience. Emotions are what make us juicy, alive, passionate.

Emotions move us to action: anger to protect ourselves from intrusion or aggression, to fight injustice or oppression; fear to move away from people or situations that could be toxic or traumatizing; sadness to reach out to others for comfort and reassurance in time of loss, pain, grief, ours or others; guilt to make amends; joy to play and create; interest to explore and learn; trust to come into safety, contentment and ease. Emotions lead us to behaviors that build capacities to engage in and navigate our world, including capacities to cope and be resilient, and even more than surviving, to come into flourishing.

Researchers have found that while we are evolutionarily hard-wired to feel negative emotions more intensely, we are also hardwired to experience positive emotions more frequently. The positivity offset to the brain's negativity bias.

The positive emotions studied in Barbara Frederickson's lab to date are: joy, gratitude serenity, interest, hope, pride, delight, inspiration, awe, and love. She acknowledges that a baseline of

safety is necessary for the cultivation of these positive emotions to have potent impact. That makes sense. Our brains learn best when we are in our window of tolerance, not too revved up, not too shut down. And in therapy, we spend a lot of time helping clients come out of trauma, stabilize into an inner secure base of functional personal self, come out of the de-railing of anxiety, depression, shame, blame when locked in loops of negative experience, or dysfunctional patterns of response to those experiences, or defenses against those experiences. We do a lot of work in therapy to get to a baseline where cultivating positive emotions can begin.

Exercise: Sharing Joy

(and why that works to build resilience)

RESEARCH FINDINGS ON BENEFITS OF POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Bob Emmons' research on gratitude at U.C. Davis as an example.

Daily practice of gratitude (felt sense of thankfulness, appreciation, wonder, savoring life's joys, not taking things for granted):

- antidotes loneliness, anxiety, resentment, envy, regret
- opens the door to other positive emotions and optimism
- promotes self-esteem and self-worth
- helps us cope better with stress and trauma
- helps us accomplish personal goals
- deepens social bonds and sense of connectedness

Exercise: Gratitude Practice

HOW POSITIVE EMOTIONS BUILD RESILIENCE: BROADEN AND BUILD THEORY

Positive emotions:

1. Help us feel better and function better. Not just emotionally, shifting mood, but physically – less stress, lower blood pressure, better functioning of immune system, less risk of heart disease, stroke and diabetes; people heal from illness and injury faster and live 7-9 years longer. Mentally – positive emotions change how the brain functions, making it easier for the brain to learn new skills, new behaviors, new points of view, new ways of being. Relationally: people demonstrate more trust, more cooperation, more collaboration, more appreciation of inter-connectedness as we move me “me” to “we.”
2. Put the brakes on negativity. Positive emotions help reset the impact of our survival responses on our body, on our thinking, on our choices. They pull us out of fight- flight- freeze mode, out of numbing or collapse, back into engagement with ourselves and the world so we can expand our capacities for resilience and skillfully deal.
3. Broaden the possibilities. We can perceive experience and respond to experience beyond the narrower range of survival responses. Positive emotions open the mind and heart to new ideas,

new behaviors of coping, new outlooks on life. There's more mental space for exploration and learning. Positivity expands the horizons and allows us to see the forest and the trees, to see the bigger picture more accurately, and to connect the dots in new ways. Positivity leads to more optimism, more confidence, more creativity, more collaboration with others, more spontaneous yet accurate decision making, more win-win solutions, better strategies of coping.

4. Builds resources to draw on long-term. Frederickson found that positivity is not a placebo with effects that are large, immediate and that may disappear, nor are the effects of positivity random or isolated. The effects of cultivating positive emotions are small, incremental, predictable, and permanent. There is a cumulative effect beyond the immediate moment of joy or interest or awe that can alter the trajectory of an entire life.

With more positivity, there is deeper self-acceptance: less shame-blame, more relaxation, forgiveness and inner peace; greater sense of purpose, meaning and fulfillment; more resonant connections with others; more receptivity, flexibility and creativity; a better balance between gravity and levity; a more buoyant, dynamic, yet realistic "ready for anything" vitality; more openness to the inter-connectedness of all of humanity; more impetus to make a lasting contribution to the larger community.

PRACTICES THAT BUILD RESILIENCE

Mindfulness and Loving Kindness

Ten years ago, researcher Barbara Frederickson participated in a meditation retreat for scientists taught by some of the country's leading teachers of mindfulness and loving kindness. She really got the power of mindfulness and loving kindness to support the steps of broaden and build and now thoroughly integrates them into her research.

Five Additional Practices to Build Resilience

Presence

Becoming present means "showing up," coming out of absent-mindedness or distraction, out of denial or dissociation, into a mindful awareness of being here, now, in this body, in this moment, and then gently sustaining this state of simply being and being with. Presence can be a momentary refuge or a respite from worries and concerns of the day; we can relax and simply breathe and be. Presence is also the gateway to neural receptivity; the brain takes a moment's breather from "doing" and actually creates the mental play space to explore something new. That optimal neural receptivity and mental play space allows our brain to more easily re-wire.

Intention

Intention is about choosing to change so that we activate the processes in the brain that create change. When we choose to focus our attention on cultivating a particular pattern of behavior, on cultivating a particular character trait, on cultivating a particular attitude or lens for filtering our experience, the repeated focus and firing begin to build new brain structure and circuitry

which in themselves support us in achieving those intentions. We turn a neural goat path into a freeway.

Perseverance

The science teaches us: repetition of a new behavior pattern, a new thought pattern, a new pattern of feelings, a new pattern of response to disaster, creates new neural structure in the brain. By persevering in the use of these tools and techniques, the new neural circuitry we are creating in our brains becomes stable enough to serve as a reliable neural platform of resilient behaviors, not easily overridden by the pulls of the past.

Refuges

Safety and trust are the well-springs of resilience, exploration and growth.

Refuge simply means a safe, supportive place to hang out when we are fragile or discombobulated. We all need refuges, safe havens, sanctuaries to re-group, to pull ourselves together, to “re-settle our molecules.” We learn to find refuge in trustworthy relationships, with partners, friends, pets, in sacred spaces of home or nature, in meditative activities (or any activity done meditatively like washing the dishes or gardening). The calm we find in those refuges helps us return to calm inside; from there, our brain recovers its capacities to see clearly and to cope in new and better ways.

Resources

Resources are the safety net of resilience. Connecting to resources includes seeking support in times of difficulty that will either alleviate the difficulty in concrete, practical ways, or that will at least nourish and replenish us so that we have the wherewithal to continue trying. Resources – material, psychological, relational, spiritual - bring life energy to our endeavors and fill us up at the very moment we need strength and energy to cope so that we find our courage rather than fall into depletion or despair.

CULTIVATE THE WELLSPRINGS OF POSITIVITY

Know what will build resilience and strengthen it

Exercise #1. Mindfulness

(and why that builds resilience)

Exercise #2. Loving Kindness

(and why that builds resilience)

Exercise #3. Gratitude practice

(and additional take-home practices)

Exercise #4. Taking in the Good and Savoring.

(and why that builds resilience)

DECREASE THE LANDMINES OF NEGATIVITY

Know what can de-rail your resilience and learn to work skillfully with it

Exercise #5: Re-direct attention, healthy distraction
(and why that builds resilience)

Exercise #6: Dispute negative thinking
(and why that builds resilience)

Exercise #7: Rewire negative emotions
(and why that builds resilience)

Exercise #8: Shift perspective from half-empty to half-full
(and why that builds resilience)

CULTIVATE ADDITIONAL WELLSPRINGS OF POSITIVITY

Exercise #9: Feedback on our Own Goodness
(and why that builds resilience)

Exercise #10: Forgiveness
(and why that builds resilience)

Exercise #11: Cultivate Experiences of Flow
(and why that builds resilience)

Exercise #12: Savor the Goodness in Relationships
(and why that builds resilience)

Cultivating positive emotions requires choosing to change.

To change one's life:

- 1. Start immediately.*
- 2. Do it flamboyantly.*
- 3. No exceptions.*

- William James

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