

Appreciate the little things in life

Factsheet

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO APPRECIATE THE LITTLE THINGS IN LIFE?

Appreciating the little things in life involves focusing our attention on what is pleasurable, nurturing, and sustaining in our lives and away from those events that are annoying, frustrating, or hurtful. It means practicing gratitude for those everyday things that are easy to take for granted or miss altogether. Adopting this outlook won't stop negative events from occurring, but it may help prevent us from over-emphasising their importance in our lives.

What do we know about gratitude?

Gratitude research is a relatively new, but fascinating area of study. The practice of keeping a gratitude journal, further explored below, is one area that has been evaluated. Studies have been conducted in which participants who kept gratitude journals were compared to those who did not or those who kept a record of daily hassles. Those recording their daily blessings were found to do better in a range of measures of wellbeing including having a more optimistic view of one's life, experiencing a generally more positive mood, showing a greater propensity to help others, and even exercising more.

How else will this build my resilience?

Developing skills in experiencing and expressing gratitude can help us connect with others. When we take the time to appreciate an act of kindness from a loved one or even a stranger we become more fully aware of our connectedness within our community, and the positive regard others have for us. Reciprocating these kind actions further cements these social bonds which we then have as a resource to draw on in times of need.

How does positive emotion relate to our mental health?

Positive emotions have been shown to be linked to good physical health. According to some researchers people who experience positive emotions are likely to live longer, enjoy better immune functioning, and recover more effectively from treatment for heart disease. It's not just our physical resilience that is affected by positive emotions, our psychological wellbeing can be assisted also. Theory has it that when we experience positive emotions we are able to think and behave more creatively and flexibly than when we experience negative emotions. This "broadening" of the way we think and act builds resources for us that we are able to use in more difficult times. Many studies have shown that resilient individuals experience positive emotions and that they use these emotions to help them cope with difficult situations. There are many things we can do to enhance and increase the presence of positive emotions for us. Learning how to appreciate the little things in life is one good way.



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WHAT CAN I DO TO APPRECIATE THE LITTLE THINGS IN LIFE?

Here are three ideas you might like to try in order to develop your ability to appreciate the little things in life.

Keep a gratitude journal

Spending 10 or 15 minutes each day writing down three to five things you are grateful for is a great way to boost your appreciation for the little things in life, and indeed the big things as well. Think creatively – the little things could be a text message from a friend, hearing a joke that made you laugh out loud, a wonderful meal, or even the experience of spending 15 minutes doing something nurturing just for you.

Perhaps after completing this exercise for a number of weeks you might like to spend some additional time writing in your journal about how this daily discipline has changed your outlook and perspective on your life.

Celebrate the little things

We are generally pretty good at marking the big moments in our own and others' lives; birthdays, weddings, graduations, once-a-year family get-togethers. What would happen if we gave ourselves permission to celebrate the little things? The how and what of celebration will depend on what's important to you. Here are some ideas.

- Keep some gold stars in your desk at work. Give one to your colleague when he or she masters a new skill or completes a challenging task.

- When the sun finally appears after a week of grey skies grab a friend or loved one and go for a walk to celebrate the good weather and regenerative effects of rain.
- Pamper yourself after getting through a daunting or tedious task, such as cleaning your room or writing a report, by doing something you enjoy.

Slow down and savour

This idea falls into the “take time to smell the roses” tradition. Try these tips to get even more out of positive emotions when you are experiencing an uplifting event.

- Try and keep a souvenir of the experience to prompt your memory later on.
- Enter as fully as you can into a positive experience. Use all your senses. Notice the details.
- Share the experience with others either as it happens or by reminiscing later on.



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Where to from here?

For further information you might like to have a look at some of these resources:

Contact these organisations:

Mental Health Information Service: 1300 794 991 or www.mentalhealth.asn.au for services in your area

Transcultural Mental Health Centre: information and referral on mental health issues: 1800 648 911 or www.dhi.gov.au/tmhc

Websites:

Changing minds: www.changingminds.org.au

Authentic Happiness: www.authentichappiness.org

The Happiness Institute:
www.thehappinessinstitute.com

Useful reading:

- Martin Seligman, (2002) *Authentic Happiness*, Random House; New York.
- Tim Sharp, (2007) *Happiness Handbook*, Finch Publishing.
- Stephanie Dowrick, (2005) *Choosing Happiness*, Allen & Unwin.
- Stephanie Dowrick, (2007) *Creative Journal Writing*, Allen & Unwin.

- Dr. Tim Sharp, (2008) *100 Ways to Happiness: a guide for busy people*, Penguin.

- Ingrid Poulson (2008), *Rise*, Pan MacMillan.

Sources

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Fredrickson, Barbara L. (2001) "The Positive of Positive Emotions in Positive Psychology" *American Psychologist*, March.

Tugade, Michele M., Frederickson, Barbara L., Barrett, Lisa Feldman (2004) "Psychological Resilience and Positive Emotional Granularity: Examining the Benefits of Positive Emotions on Coping and Health" *Journal of Personality*, 72:6, pp.1162-1190.

Bryant, F.B., and Veroff, J. (2006) *Savouring: A new model of positive experience*. Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group.

Mental Health Information Service - information and referral on mental health issues: 1300 794 991 www.mentalhealth.asn.au

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The Mental Health Association NSW and Mental Health Week NSW are funded by NSW Health.

