Happiness Interventions

Happiness is the consequence of personal effort. You must fight for it, strive for it, and insist upon it.

— Elizabeth Gilbert —
Good life: Under our control?

- 50% genetics/biology; 10% life circumstances; 40% intentional activity!!
- **Intentional activity** – activities we actively choose & require sustained effort
Intentional Change

• Happiness is nice
• ....AND it also predicts other good things (protect against mental illness, increased markers of physical health, longer life, etc.)
• Worthwhile pursuit
Intentional Change

• Promising approach: Positive psychology interventions:
  – “Treatment methods or *intentional activities* aimed at cultivating positive feelings, positive behaviours, or positive cognitions”
  – Building strengths (not heal, fix, remedy, treat pathologies or deficiencies)
Intentional activities

Often modeled on characteristics of happy people

– Practicing kindness
– Cultivate strengths
– Count blessings
– Visualize ideal future selves
Practicing kindness

Kindness entails enacting kind behaviour *toward* other people.

Do happy people practice more kindness? (study 1)

And…If so, if we pay more attention to our acts of kindness during the day, do we become more happy? (Study 2)
Practicing kindness: Study 1 (Otake et al., 2006)

• **Purpose:** are happy people are more kind than less happy people?

• **Hypothesis:** happy people will report more of 3 kindness components:
  
  – (a) the *motivation* to be kind to others (“I am always thinking that I wish to be kind and help other people in daily life”);
  
  – (b) the *recognition* of kindness acts (“I recognize that I always help other people in daily life”); and
  
  – (c) the enactment of kind *behaviour* (“I do kind things and help others everyday”).
Practicing kindness: Study 1 (Otake et al., 2006)

- **Study type**: correlational (non-experimental)
- **Participants**: 175 (20 males; 155 females) Japanese undergraduate students
- **Methods & measures**:
  - Japanese version of Subjective Happiness Scale (JSHS),
  - a kindness scale measuring its three components (“strength of kindness”)
Mean scores of kindness components of happy and less happy people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindness strengths</th>
<th>Happy people</th>
<th>Less happy people</th>
<th>$t$ (173)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>2.33 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>3.10 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>3.14 *</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Practicing kindness: Study 2 (Otake et al., 2006)

• **Purpose**: effects of a “counting kindnesses” intervention on people's happiness?

• **Participants:**
  – *Kindness intervention group*: 71 F undergrads from a psych class
  – *Control group*: 48 F undergrads from another psych class
Why count kindness?

If people become more conscious of their kind behaviour in daily life through a counting kindnesses intervention, they may (a) increasingly wish to be kind to others, (b) more strongly recognize themselves as kind people, and/or (c) more frequently enact kind behaviours toward others.
Practicing kindness: Study 2
(Otake et al., 2006)

• **Methods/Measures:**
  
  – *counting kindnesses intervention:*
    
    • keep track of each act of kindness they performed toward other people for 1 wk & report the daily #
  
  – Self-report questionnaires
    
    • JSHS baseline (1 month before) & after intervention (1 month after) – all participants
Practicing kindness: Study 2 (Otake et al., 2006)

How to be really happy:

• divided kindness intervention participants w/large increases in happiness vs. small changes

• Investigated differences in actual kind behaviour
Practicing kindness: Study 2 (Otake et al., 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Large-increase group</th>
<th>Small-change group</th>
<th>t (69)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of actual kind behavior</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>3.01*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Practicing kindness: Study 2
(Otake et al., 2006)

• **Conclusion:**
  – 1-week intervention that simply asks people to count kindnesses may increase people's subjective happiness
Intentional activities

Gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2003)
What is “Gratitude”? 

• Feeling: sense of wonder, thankfulness and appreciation

• Stems from the perception of a positive outcome, not necessarily deserved or earned

• Other-directed—persons, as well as to nonhuman sources (e.g., nature, God, animals, the cosmos)
Why cultivate gratitude?

• Intrinsically rewarding state
• Fosters savouring, which maximizes enjoyment
• Prevents taking things in life for granted
• Positively reinterpret problematic life events
• Stimulates moral behaviour (helping)
• Builds social bonds
• Incompatible with negative emotions
Gratitude intervention

• **Study length:** 3 weeks

• **Participants:**
  – 65 adults with congenital or adult-onset NMD (Post-polio, Charcot-Marie-Tooth, or Fascioscapulohumera)
    • Gratitude condition (n = 33)
    • Control condition (only well-being measures) (n = 32)
Gratitude condition

“There are many things in our lives, both large and small, that we might be grateful about. Write down on the lines below up to five things in your life that you are grateful or thankful for.”

Completed daily for 3 weeks
Gratitude condition

Examples of gratitude-inducing experiences listed by participants were:

• “waking up this morning,”
• “the generosity of friends,”
• “to God for giving me determination,”
• “for wonderful parents,”
• “to the Lord for just another day,” and
• “to the Rolling Stones.”
Gratitude intervention

Method/measures:
• Packet of 21 “daily experience rating forms” to fill out at the end of the day
  – Daily affect (32 discrete emotions, rate 1-5)
  – SWB: life as a whole this week (terrible-delighted)
  – Optimism about the upcoming week
  – Connectedness with others
  – Health behaviours (hours sleep, physical pain, exercise)
  – Functional status (bathing, eating, toilet)
  – Observer reports: PANAS, SWLS (begin-end)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Gratitude</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>F (1, 63)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude composite</td>
<td>10.87</td>
<td>8.91</td>
<td>9.80*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotions</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>5.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotions</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>4.37*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfaction w/life</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>13.77**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Optimistic</td>
<td>5.70</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>5.38*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected w/ others</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>11.67**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable</td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observer reports (positive emotion)</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observer reports (negative emotion)</td>
<td>No diff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observer reports (satisfaction w/life)</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>&lt;.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dependent variable</td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>F (1, 63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours of sleep</td>
<td>7.58</td>
<td>7.06</td>
<td>5.60*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refreshed upon waking</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>3.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical pain</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pain interference</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>1.78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Functional status</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gratitude intervention

• Conclusion/discussion:
  – Easily implemented strategy
  – Effects even apparent to others
  – Amazing consider other influences on well-being (e.g., life stressors & circumstances)
  – Unknown how long benefits will last
Intentional activities

Expressing gratitude

Visualising Best Possible Self

Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006
Matching interventions

• Not every mood-boosting intervention benefits every individual
• May or may not *fit* with someone’s personality, motives, strengths, needs.
• Match may be linked with more sustained activity, better performance, more satisfaction, etc.
What is “best possible self”

Possible selves have been defined as idiographic representations of goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986), encompassing all of the futures that people can imagine for themselves (their “most cherished self-wishes” Allport, 1961).
Why visualize best possible self?

• Opportunity to learn about oneself
• Illuminate & restructure priorities
  – Improves self-regulation
  – Reduce goal conflict
• Gain a feeling of control over life
• Imagining success can improve performance
• Benefits associated with positive thinking
Gratitude & VBPS interventions

• Participants:
  – 67 Undergraduate students
    • Expressing gratitude
    • Visualizing best possible self
    • Control condition (details of the day)

• Intervention length: 4 weeks
You have been randomly assigned to try to **cultivate a sense of gratitude** now, and during the next few weeks. “Cultivate a sense of gratitude” means that you make an effort to think about the many things in your life, both large and small, that you have to be grateful about. These might include particular supportive relationships, sacrifices or contributions that others have made for you, facts about your life such as your advantages and opportunities, or even gratitude for life itself, and the world that we live in.
You have been randomly assigned to **think about your best possible self** now, and during the next few weeks. “‘Think about your best possible self’” means that you imagine yourself in the future, after everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your life goals. Think of this as the realization of your life dreams, and of your own best potentials. In all of these cases you are identifying the best possible way that things might turn out in your life, in order to help guide your decisions now.
You have been randomly assigned to **pay more attention to the daily details** of your life. “Pay more attention to your life” means that you take notice of the ordinary details of your life that you wouldn’t typically think about. These might include particular classes or meetings you attend, typical interactions with acquaintances, typical thoughts that you have during the day, or your typical schedule as you move through the day. In all of these cases, you may be helped to better identify problem areas in your life, and to take action to change them.
Gratitude & VBPS intervention

• Session I
  – PANAS
  – Intervention exercise: expressing gratitude, VBPS, control
  – PANAS
  – Person-intervention match?
Gratitude vs BPS: Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006

• Session II (2 wk later) & Session III (4 wk later)
  – PANAS
  – Continuing exercise:
    • (2 wks): “How many times did you actually do the exercise over the last two weeks?”
    • (4 wk): “Are you still doing the exercise?”
Gratitude & VBPS: Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006

Assigned Exercise

Gratitude & BP:

Control

Positive Affect

Pre-Intervention  Post-Intervention
Gratitude & VBPS intervention

• Results:
  – Only VBPS produced a significant increase in immediate PA (gratitude exercise fell midway)
  – VBPS exercise showed the highest degree of person-intervention match
  – Matching predicted whether participants continued to carry out the exercise over the next 4 weeks
Intentional activities
(Seligman et al., 2005)
Comparison study: Seligman et al., 2005

• **Study**: randomized control experiment (5 conditions & control)
  – Gratitude visit
  – 3 good things in life
  – You at your best
  – Using signature strengths
  – Identify signature strengths
  – Placebo control condition
Comparison study: Seligman et al., 2005

Gratitude visit

• one week to write and then deliver a letter of gratitude in person to someone who has been kind to them but never properly thanked
Comparison study: Seligman et al., 2005

3 good things in life
• write down three things that went well each day and their causes every night for one week
Comparison study: Seligman et al., 2005

You at your best

• write about a time when they were at their best and then to reflect on the personal strengths displayed in the story. They were told to review their story once every day for a week and to reflect on the strengths they had identified.
Comparison study: Seligman et al., 2005

Using **signature strengths** in a new way.
- asked to take an inventory of character strengths and to receive individualized feedback about their top five («signature») strengths.
- asked to use one of these top strengths in a new and different way every day for one week.
VIA Classification of Character Strengths

Creativity | Curiosity | Judgment | Perspective | Bravery | Perseverance
Zest | Honesty | Social Intelligence | Kindness | Love | Leadership
Fairness | Teamwork | Forgiveness | Love of Learning | Gratitude | Spirituality
Self-Regulation | Humility | Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence | Prudence | Hope | Humor

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Comparison study: Seligman et al., 2005

Identifying *signature strengths*.

- This exercise was a truncated version of the one just described, without the instruction to use signature strengths in new ways.
- Participants were asked to take the survey, to note their five highest strengths, and to use them more often during the next week.
Comparison study

• **Participants:**
  – 577 visitors to website (authentic happiness) – internet-based experiment

• **Methods/measures:**
  – 1 week intervention (continue if you like)
  – Questionnaires (baseline, post-test, 1 wk, 1 mon, 3 mons, 6mons)
    • Steen Happiness Index: reflects pleasant, engaged, and meaningful life
    • Depression Scale (CESD)
Comparison study: Seligman et al., 2005

• Results:
  – All conditions happier/less depressed at immediate post-test (including control)
  – Gratitude showed the largest immediate boost, but returned to baseline by 3 mons
  – 3 good things & using strengths showed benefits one month following post-test (happier than baseline & stayed happier at 3 mons & 6 mons)
The specifics: Intentional activities

• Generally, they tend to work, but need further research

• Activities features:
  – Frequency & dosage, autonomously chosen, varied/same, self/other-oriented, social (being kind) vs cognitive (savoring memories)
The specifics:
Intentional activities

• Person features:
  – Effort, believe effort will pay off, personality
    (extravert & openness, better?)

• Person-activity fit?
BREAK
Mind Full, or Mindful?
Have you ever started eating a snack bar, taken a couple of bites, then noticed all you had left was an empty packet in your hand?
Have you ever been driving somewhere and arrived at your destination only to realize you remember nothing about your journey?
Have you ever said something that, after reflection, you wish you hadn’t?
Mindlessness

• Little awareness of what is happening NOW
• “automatic pilot”
• Absorbed in thoughts, emotions, worries, concerns, etc.
• Good for efficiency, but limits freely-chosen, intentional action & contributes to suffering
Mindfulness - Defined

Paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non judgmentally. (Kabat-Zinn)
Practice of mindfulness

- Focus on current moment (breathing, sensations, sounds)
- Mind will wander. We notice this, label it “I’m thinking”, let it go, and then return to the present moment.
Practice of mindfulness

• Formal practices: Sitting meditation, walking meditation, body scan, yoga
• Training attention to bring it under voluntary control
Practice of mindfulness

• "neurons that fire together, wire together“
  – the more we practice, the more we develop neuro-pathways in the brain associated with being mindful, which make it easier to be fully in the present moment
(“in a particular way”: Cultivating attitudes)

• Non-judging
  – Not to stop thinking, but to be aware; see clearly

• Patience
  – Events to unfold in their own time; we are here anyways

• Beginner’s mind
  – Willing to see everything as if it is the first time
(“in a particular way”: Cultivating attitudes)

• Non-striving
  – Letting go of preconceived expectations; “shoulds”

• Acceptance
  – Being, rather than wishing away (emotions, sensations)

• Letting go
  – Non-attachment of thoughts, feelings, experiences
Mindfulness – Why?

• See ourselves and our lives more clearly (exit autopilot)
• Opportunities for self-improvement

"When you REACT, you are giving away your power. When you RESPOND, you are staying in control of yourself."
React
- Passive-aggressive
- Infighting
- Short-sighted
- Gossip & Rumor
- Over-reacting
- Uncooperative
- Jumping to Conclusions

Unproductive

Respond
- Goals
- Performance
- Knowledgeable
- Group success
- Compromise
- Teamwork
- Big Picture
- Facts, Data & Information

Productive
Mindfulness: Religious or secular

• Integral part of Eastern philosophies and religions, but not itself religious
• Now been adapted for secular purposes
Mindfulness-based interventions

• Jon Kabat-Zinn
• MBSR program - chronic pain, heart disease, anxiety, sleep problems, depression
• Substantial research for improving lives
Mindfulness-based interventions

• Experiential learning course
  – 8 weeks program (2-3 hours each),
  – ½ day silent retreat,
  – core curriculum of formal & informal practices;
  and
  – home practice between meetings
The research

• Limitations of rigor, but support for benefits

• Physical benefits:
  – relaxation,
  – coping with illness, stress, pain

• Psychological benefits:
  – sense of control,
  – autonomy;
  – concentration and attention
The research

• Even brief interventions:
  – increased self esteem
  – daily positive affect,
  – personality “growth” (increased extraversion, openness, agreeableness, emotional stability)
Mechanisms of Action

How do we know “mindfulness” is responsible for the benefits seen in mindfulness interventions?
Measuring mindfulness

• Mindful Attention Awareness Scale: Captures mindfulness by “absence of mindless behaviours”
Measuring mindfulness

• Examples:
• ”I could be experiencing some emotion and not be conscious of it until later”
• ”I find it difficult to stay focused on what is happening in the present”
• ”It seems I am “running on automatic” without much awareness of what I am doing”
• ””I rush through activities without really being attentive to them”
• ”I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past”
Mediation model

- MBSR versus control
- Outcome: stress, quality of life
- Assessed “mindfulness” as mediating factor
- Results: Partially responsible for positive effects
Mindfulness and practicalities

- Appealing because simple prescription
- Reminds us to slow down, become aware of ourselves and the world around us
Adding a little extra to mindfulness
A moment of self-compassion can change your entire day. A string of such moments can change the course of your life.

~Christopher K. Germer
Self-esteem: The Dark Side

1) **Wrong contingencies:** Making self-esteem contingent on an area/domain of life that is being frustrated

2) **Involves Judgment:** Contingent SE (pressure to meet external standards)

3) **Pursuing SE:** Set goals that could undermine well-being
Self-compassion

• Getting research attention due to its strong link to psychological health
• Relevant to all personal experiences of suffering (inadequacies, failures, painful life situations, etc.)
Self-kindness

- Caring and understanding with oneself (rather than being harshly critical)
- Tone is kind and supportive (rather than attacking and berating)
- When life is stressful, may pause and comfort, soothe the self, before “fixing”

Be careful how you are talking to yourself because you are listening.
~Lisa M. Hayes
Common humanity

• Recognizing that all humans are imperfect
• Connects own flawed condition to the shared human condition
• As opposed to feeling isolated from others who are living “normal happy lives”

Compassion links us to others. We share a common humanity - with a common wish to be happy, free from suffering and to live with grace.

~ Marianne Williamson
Mindfulness

• Being aware of painful experiences in a balanced way (neither ignore, or ruminate)
• Prevent being carried away by the “story” (over-identification)
Enhancing self-compassion?

• Self-compassion found to be a key link between mindfulness interventions and well-being
• Both “Mindfulness” & “self-compassion” are mediators of MBSR effects
• Intervention specifically targeted to developing self-compassion to maximize benefits?
Self-compassion interventions

• Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC)
  – 8 weeks, 2.5 hours/week; half-day retreat
  – Most self-compassion, 1 session to mindfulness
  – Formal and informal practices
  – Experiential exercises, discussions, homework
  – Goal: variety of tools to increase SC
  – “motivate themselves as they would a caring friend”
Self-compassion & pathology

• Lower levels of anxiety & depression
• Less rumination, perfectionism, and fear of failure
• Less likely to suppress unwanted thoughts
• Cope effectively with life stressors (academic failure, childhood maltreatment, chronic pain)
Self-compassion & well-being

• More psychological strengths (optimism, wisdom, exploration, initiative)
• Improved relationship functioning: empathy, altruism, perspective taking, forgiveness
• Health behaviours: enhanced nutrition, reduced smoking, seeking medical treatment, exercising