

# A Plan for Using Positive Psychology to Build Resilience and Create Change

version 1

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## Overview

This plan is all about energizing your life, or more specifically, about practicing a set of positive psychology tools that you can adapt and apply over time to cultivate a life that is aligned with what is most important to you. It can't replace therapy or intensive behavioral work, but it has a track record of being an effective playbook for the folks I've worked with, and it might have the same benefit for you.

This document is based on activities that I have pulled from positive psychology research, my own research, and my background and training as a therapist. In my positive psychology university class, we focus directly on making a difference in your own life, both for your sake and for the sake of others. Because I believe this so strongly, my classes have required students to try these activities. Literally hundreds of students have used these techniques, and they tell me that this one semester, this one class, changed their lives. That's what I want for you!

This plan is divided into sections that will guide you toward making the changes you want in living a happier, better, more fulfilling life.

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Note: In my class I use articles and also the textbook by Hefferon & Boniwell (2011). It is hard to come by but hopefully you get the gist from the activity descriptions.



## Getting Oriented

Over the years, I have worked with thousands of people through workshops, classes, coaching, and therapy, and I have learned a few lessons that come up so frequently that I view them almost like rules. You can think of them as your orientation guide to energizing your life. You will have three menus of activities to choose from. The activities are organized according to themes of "Present," "Future," and "Other People." This plan is set up to help you define a goal and then apply activities from each of these three themes to working toward that goal. I have a huge store of activities that I can draw from...after all I've been involved with positive psychology and related topics since 2001...and in future updates I'll distributed other menus, such as "Past" and "Same Thing Done in a Different Way." For now, we can start with these three menus.

But, it really doesn't matter what menus I put out there. I think there are some general rules of human nature we might want to address before diving into any behavior change program.

First, trying to motivate other people is hard and usually not very fun. A corollary to that rule is that it is difficult and unpleasant when other people try to motivate us. Your desire for change will be most effective and most enjoyable if it comes from within you. Even if you're only motivated for something that seems small right now, we can work with that. Motivation can grow in scope and ambition once you start, and things get moving.

Second, you get out of it what you put into it. Every semester, there are students in my class who flip through their phones, or skip class, or roll their eyes when I introduce kindness, or gratitude, or character strengths, or when we describe activities designed to boost mindfulness, curiosity, or meaning and purpose in life. This handful of students who refuse to take the opportunity to try new approaches to living their lives tend to rate my class as just "average." Yet, the vast majority of students think the class changed their lives. How can this be? I'm the same teacher, talking about the same materials, and giving everyone equal access to self-knowledge, self-development, happiness-boosting tools. I think the differences is whether or not they put effort into the class and the activities. If we wait around for someone to whisper the magic words, or share some brilliant insight, that will suddenly change our perspective, we are likely to be very disappointed. If we expect to absorb happiness as if we're a sponge, we are missing the point. Happiness, fulfillment, a meaningful existence, and a life worth living don't fall from the sky on parachutes. The life we want emerges out of the way we live it, each month, each week, each day, each hour.

Third, we don't have to change everything at once. This plan is about little shifts, little additions to your repertoire that make a big difference. But the reason they make a big difference is not because they are so wise, so unexpected, so new, or so brilliant that just hearing them changes everything. They make a big difference the same way drops of water make a difference to a stream. They make a big difference because this plan is



designed to support you in doing little things, living a little differently each day. Every time you do these activities, you are adding a bit more water to the stream until it flows healthily along.

Fourth, we're all similar, but we're not the same. My approach embraces the fact that we are all a bit different, we don't have the same context, experiences, personalities, opportunities, background, or knowledge of psychology. What works for me might not work for you. What works for you might not work for your friend. On top of that, we change over time, and our lives have rhythms that fluctuate with the seasons, or the week, or the time of day. It's a bit like food. Pistachios are healthy and a nice source of protein and fiber, plus it takes less of our planet's precious water to grow them than is needed for other nuts. So, should everyone eat pistachios? Of course not, some people are deathly allergic, some hate the taste, and some are content with their quinoa. It is more important to analyze the functional role that pistachios are supposed to play. They are gentler on the planet, they are nutritious, they are kind of fun to eat, so they provide a pretty guilt-free snack that helps us be healthy. If you don't like pistachios, no problem, we just need to look for other snacks that are healthy, enjoyable to eat, provide nutrition, and are gentle on the planet. Maybe that's sunflower seed, broccoli, plantains, or maybe to wash down a snack like cauliflower, you do better if you get to chomp some Cool Ranch Doritos. The *WHY* of the snack is more important than the *WHAT*. I've designed this plan to include multiple activity that all serve a similar purpose. To be happy, it is helpful to build skills that help us live in the present, work toward the future, connect with others, understand ourselves, and find our place in the world. I simply provide a menu, and as long as you choose—and do—an activity, it doesn't matter what exact activity you choose. Because of this, we start with what you want.

So, what do you want?

*Feel free to scribble some thoughts on your goals here...*

## Setting Goals

Changing the way we do things in life isn't easy. If it was, we'd all be literally perfect by now. One of the problems with reading books or watching videos about happiness or "changing your life" is that we usually don't have our own agenda, one that really connects with deep down. We might only have an uneasy feeling that life should be better than this, or that we are carrying some kind of baggage with us, or perhaps that we should be a better person in some way. But how? We don't have anything specific in mind, so we are left with the notion that "stuff should be better somehow" and "we should try some of this." We might come away inspired by someone's trip to Bali, or by the author who devoted a year of her life to trying everything, but what are we supposed to do? We can't all go to Bali, or spend a year devoted only to our happiness.

That is why I will push you to have a focal point, a goal, or at least *something* they would like to see be... different. That is your task right now. What do you want to be different? What do you want to achieve? What needs to improve? What can nudge life a bit closer to how you wish it was? Heck, what can help you figure out what a better life would even be?

The first step, then, is coming up with some ideas about what you would like to achieve by using this plan. It is helpful if you commit to this. Sure, your ideas might change as you grow, but having a focal point is very, very helpful in giving solidity to your engagement in these activities. To reiterate, the first step is coming up with a goal that is at least kind of interesting or important to you right now. Then, you should commit to pursuing that goal throughout this program. You can add to it, by making it bigger or adding other goals—heck, you can even do the whole plan over again focusing on other goals—but there is value simply in sticking to this one goal. You should also know that you will not be isolated as you pursue this goal. Many of the activities you will try in this program will involve other people in some way – you won't be alone.

One last thought. If you enjoy cycling through this plan the first time—picking three activities, one from each of the menus—then feel free to cycle through again, choosing different activities each time around.

Let's get going!

## Three Steps to Positive Change

### Step One

Use the following questions to help you identify the general outlines of your goal:

- In the next 2-3 months, what would you like to happen that would be better than what is happening now?
- How does this goal fit with your values, and what you believe is most important in life?

That's not so bad, is it? You might feel that your goal feels vague, or that it isn't as deep or profound as you might have expected. All of that is ok. At the risk of revealing one of the secrets of this plan – the real benefits come from the effort you put toward pursuing this goal over time, not really what the content of the goal itself is. As long as pursuing this goal is reasonably well-aligned with your values, everything should turn out ok.

### Step Two

Let's add more specifics to your goal. This step is harder than the first step, so it is a good idea to set aside some time so that you can wrestle with these questions and prompts.

1. Jot down some descriptions and details about your goal...what you want to achieve/change/improve/develop... and write down what your timeline is.
2. Why is this goal important to you? Try to list all the reasons, whether they are noble, silly, or even make you feel a bit embarrassed.
3. Why do you think positive psychology would help you improve in this area? What are your beliefs about positive psychology as a tool for change and what makes you interested in trying this plan out?
4. How will you know when you succeed at moving towards your project?
5. Describe a potential plan to achieve your goal by flipping through the menu of activities in the rest of this plan, making some guesses at which ones you might like to try, and how often you are going to take on an activity. You don't have to concoct a very detailed plan, as you read the menus of activities I have for you yet. We just want to see how you're thinking ahead for this project.
6. How do you plan to track your outcomes? I will provide suggestions for useful scientific surveys and questionnaires, but maybe you have other ideas as well.

### Step Three

Once you have worked through Steps One and Two, I strongly suggest that you sit down with someone and have them ask you the interview questions listed below. It is definitely better to do this face to face (\*\*\*)or by videochat(\*\*\*) – texts and emails are not as good as being able to see and interact with this person. (Feel free to ask them the same questions – we can learn a lot from how people approach their own desired changes.)

Each of these questions has the same purpose. Each one is trying to make our hopes and goals for the future a bit more concrete. Vague goals are really hard to achieve, and it can be impossible to either know where to start or know whether we're getting any closer. So, try to use these questions as ways to focus you on real goals that you can work toward in real life.

#### Positive Change Interview Questions:

What can you do to make progress?

What internal resources do you need (like knowledge, skills, resilience, etc.)?

What external resources do you need (like money, car, support, etc.)?

What obstacles might you encounter?

How can you prepare your response to those obstacles?

What is the first step you can take today? And this week?

Whew! Believe it or not, half the work has been done already. Thinking about, clarifying, specifying, and discussing your goals with someone else are tangible signs that you are committed and already working on making your life better. Congratulations!

### A Quick Note to Your Future Self

Take a moment to write a note about how you're feeling right now as you embark on your new project. You'll be reading this note in a few weeks or months, so think about what you want your future self to know about why you chose this set of goals for yourself and what you are hoping to get out of it. You can write about your worries or your dreams, the obstacles or the tools you think will be there for you. You can write about how you think you will feel at the end of this project. Maybe you can already start thinking about the people with whom you want to share the insights you will learn along with way. Don't worry about what you write, after all it's only you who will be reading this! =)

## The Activities

If you're following the flow of this plan, you already have done a lot of thinking, writing, hopefully even talking and sharing about your hopes. It is time to give you some tools! Most of the rest of this document is a menu of activities organized into three themes: Present, Future, Other People. We start with the Present. It might seem counterintuitive to start with the present when this whole plan is about creating a brighter future, but I have my reasons! =)

One reason is that the future is made-up, complete fantasy, not real. Heck, even the past is totally pretend. Dreams and memories are powerful, but they are not real. The only reality we mortal humans are able to access is the present. The now. Right now, you are completely real. Life happens in the now, so a better life also will happen in the now. We start with the Present because that is all we have. In fact, the biggest trick to creating a better life is doing the little things Right Now that will eventually add up to a better life in the future "Now."

The word count for these activities is all over the place. If you're like me, you might think "that's too long to read!" or "if it can be described so quickly it must be useless." I would encourage you to overcome any tendencies you might have to avoid too many words or too few words. Just read through each of the activities and see which calls to you.

I suggest that you choose some way of assessing your progress. If you have access to good university libraries, you can find lots of research tools that can be used to give you scores on wellbeing, positive emotions, mindfulness, meaning in life, gratitude, and on and on. If you do not, you can sign up for [www.authentichappiness.org](http://www.authentichappiness.org) and use the wealth of surveys offered there. I recommend taking whatever surveys you think sound interesting now, and then after each week of activities.

## PRESENT

While the Past is dead and the Future is a fantasy, the cool thing about the Present is that we can have the flavors and smells of past and future all at once right now. When we build our skills for the Present we are really learning the skills we need to keep making the nudges and choices that create the Future we dream of, and preserve the whole authentic Past that made us who we are.

Your job is to choose one of the activities below and shape it so that it can serve your behavior change goal. Then execute the plan over the course of 1 week. Make sure to save time to reflect on how it has affected your outlook, behavior, motivation, or life.

### Positive Body & Health

Historically, the body is under-recognized both in positive psychology and psychology in general. Recently, there has been an increase in evidences for the importance of the body within optimal physical and psychological functioning. Combining the elements of both hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, psychologists, especially Kate Hefferon, propose that people can create a "positive body" via five core mechanisms: *human touch, positive sexual behavior, physical activity, nutrition and even physical pain*. These five components assist either momentary experiences of pleasure or longer lasting feelings of meaning and self-development. This experiential activity helps you to engage in actions that help develop a "positive body."

Instructions: Before you start, read Chapter 9 of Hefferon & Boniwell (2011) to get a better understanding of what a positive body is and learn about the strategies to develop a positive body that have been supported by research. If you can't get a copy of the book, it is enough to know that your goal is to move closer to a relationship with your physical self and body that is mutually enriching: your mind commits to practices that foster health to benefit the body, and also pays attention to the pleasure and capacity for experience that our bodies can provide.

Pick an activity within the following 3 categories: human touch (i.e. massage therapy, personal contact with others), physical activity (i.e. exercise), and nutrition (i.e. having a nutritionally balanced diet) and carry it out every day for a week. At the end of each day, reflect on the activity you did and report your thoughts and feelings on the process. Please record your impressions of your perceived health, perceived wellbeing, any changes in your relationship to your body and health.

### Mindfulness

Meditation has been defined as the act of inward contemplation and the intermediate state between attention to a stimulus and complete absorption in it (Taylor, 1999). There are evidences suggesting that both concentration and mindfulness meditation are associated with a variety of clinical benefits, including anxiety and stress regulation, reduction of chronic pain, and management of medical illnesses. Loving-kindness meditation is a type of concentration meditation focused on directing warm, compassionate feelings to self and others. This experiential activity gives you a chance to practice a type of concentration meditation.

Instructions: Before you start, if possible, read Johnson et al. (2009) to get a better understanding of loving-kindness meditation and its benefits. Even without it, just know that you will be spending time focusing your attention on cultivating warm and compassionate feelings for others.

Then, click on this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auS1HtAz6Bs> and practice the meditation by following the instructions in the recording every day for a week. At the end of each day, reflect on the meditation you did and report your thoughts and feelings on the process. Keep a log of you reflections.

### Flow

Flow is a rewarding state in which we might achieve a state of deep concentration, feel in control, lose track of time, lose ourselves in the moment, engage deeply in an activity without shining that negative spotlight on ourselves, and just being in the execution of an activity itself. To increase flow in your life, you need to take two main steps. First, you need to be on the lookout and keep track of when you enter flow, or when you are close to flow. Second, you need to alter your approach to likely opportunities to experience flow to make that experience more likely. This experiential activity helps you explore and experience flow.

Instructions: Before you start, read over Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi (2014) which will give you pretty much everything you ever wanted to know. In particular, look at the list of characteristics of flow on p. 90. Write (a) a list of times when you have gotten closest to achieving the state described in the list on p. 90. The next day, as you go through your day, take note of times when

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you seem to be getting close to a flow state and create (b) a list of those activities. (If you can't track down this book, the characteristics of flow are: intense and focused concentration on what you are doing in the current moment, action and awareness blend together, you do not feel self-conscious, you feel that you are in control and can deal with whatever happens next, your sense of the passage of time gets distorted, and the activity feels intrinsically motivated because you enjoy the activity itself and are not simply striving for some outside goal.)

From the two lists you have created, (a) and (b) above, choose 1-3 activities that you think you will be able to do over the next 6 days. If you do one of those activities every day, great. If not, choose a variety of activities such that at least one will happen every day in the next 6 days. For example, if you get into flow doing homework every day, that is great for this activity. If you run every other day, then you can use that activity on three of the days and choose 1-2 other activities for non-running days.

Flow is most likely when we are effectively balancing our abilities and the challenges we take on so that we are just at the edge of what we can do, learning to grow and get better, and are neither bored nor overwhelmed. For your 7 days, try to engage in each of your chosen activities with a particular attitude of balancing between anxiety and boredom to achieve flow. If you are just learning a new skill, choose a less challenging activity, increasing challenge as you get better. If you are a master, keep upping the challenge (within reason and safety). You also can put in effort at acquiring better skills to allow you to meet greater challenges. At the end of each day, write down the activity you chose, the strategy you used (increasing or decreasing challenge, learning to acquire better skills), and how close you got to achieving a flow state using a checklist of the features of flow provided on p. 90 (or the stuff in parentheses from the Instructions).

### Signature Strengths

Signature strengths are strengths of character that a person owns, celebrates, and frequently exercises (Peterson, 2006). This experiential activity helps you to creatively extend the use of your signature strengths in your everyday life.

*Instructions:* First, spend some time considering the talents you have, the activities you engage in that make you feel most natural and "like yourself," and the parts of your personality and abilities that feel most like "you at your best." Write a little bit about each aspect that comes to mind. If you are stuck, ask someone who knows you well. Finally, choose one of your strengths.

For one week, take a challenge to use the chosen signature strength in a new way every day. You can use some of the suggestions to use signature strengths in new ways outlined in the document, but also come up with some new ways your own. At the end of each day, reflect on how you used your strengths that day and report your thoughts and feelings on the process. Please keep a log of your reflections.

### Savoring

Have you ever been engaged in a positive experience and become aware, while it was happening, that you were having "the time of your life"? Have you ever enjoyed a positive activity so much that you wished it could go on forever? Attending to, appreciating, and enhancing positive experiences in one's life is known as savoring. Unfortunately, we often fail to appreciate these experiences fully,

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and we may not be consciously aware of the specific things that make these experiences enjoyable. This experiential activity encourages you to practice your savoring skills by identifying and seeking out positive experiences, savoring them, and reflecting on the strategies you used to savor those experiences.

*Instructions:* Savoring is all about amplifying your positive experiences in the moment. To do that, you need to pay attention both to the event that is occurring and also to your own positive responses to that event. For example, if you are eating a chocolate truffle, to savor that experience you would want to focus your attention on the eating of the truffle, and also on the sensation in your teeth of biting through the harder chocolate exterior into the softer interior, the spread of the chocolate flavor through your mouth, the way the chocolate itself warms and flows around your mouth, and the specific bittersweet taste of chocolate, among other elements such as the truffle's aroma. This allows you to really dive into the experience of eating the truffle with maximum attention to what about that experience is enjoyable to you.

The savoring expedition is broken down into the following two phases, each involving several simple steps that will guide you to savor more fully:

#### Phase 1: Plan Your Savoring Expedition

Step 1: Choose something to savor. Before embarking on your savoring expedition, think about an activity, experience, place, or object you find enjoyable that will be the target of your expedition.

Step 2: Set aside some time for savoring. Block out a time when you are free from having to think about other things. Step 3: Gather materials for your savoring expedition. Determine the things (e.g., money, comfortable shoes) you will need to have with you on your expedition.

Phase 2: Embark on Your Savoring Expedition Step 4: Set out on your savoring expedition. When you arrive at your destination, try to set aside any worries or concerns, and be fully in the moment and appreciate what is immediately in front of you. Step 5: Savor. Try to pinpoint what you find enjoyable (e.g., sights, sounds, smells, emotions, thoughts) about the particular activity, experience, place, or object you are trying to savor. Bryant and Veroff (2007) suggest 10 strategies to enhance your savoring experience, including sharing with others, concentrating on encoding the event into your memory, focusing as much as possible on each sensation, congratulating yourself on creating openness to the experience, and engaging in a behavioral expression of enjoyment such as giggling, smiling, or even high fiving yourself.

If you find that you are having trouble savoring, do not criticize or force yourself. If you feel your savoring expedition is too contrived or unnatural, then go home and try again another time. At the end of each day, reflect on the savoring activity you did and report your thoughts and feelings on the process.

#### Meaning Photos

Meaning in life is defined as the extent to which people make sense of or see significance in their lives and perceive a purpose or overarching aim in life (Steger, 2009). Understanding your meaning in life may feel like a daunting task. This experiential activity helps you to identify and capture sources of meaning in your everyday life through the method of photography.

*Instructions:* Before you start, read Steger (2009) and Steger et al. (2013) to learn more about meaning in life as a construct and this experiential activity. Although meaning in life may seem complex, if you focus on small parts of it, the path to meaning becomes much more straightforward and even practical. In this activity, you are going to focus on simply taking notice of and documenting the parts of your life that seem meaningful to you. This builds what researchers call the “coherence” dimension of meaning, that desire we each have to make sense of our lives and to feel that there is a sensible place for us out there in the big world.

Throughout the course of a week, reflect on what makes your life meaningful and take pictures of five things using a camera or your cell phone. Do not choose an existing photo but actively engage in taking photos of the things in your current life that are meaningful to you. If something that gives meaning to your life is abstract or distant, take a picture of something that could represent it. Try to spread out the photos so that you are taking 1 or 2 photos every day for a week. At the end of the week, look back over the photos and describe what each photo represents and why it is meaningful for you. Share with someone if that’s possible.

## FUTURE

As you build your skills of engaging in, noticing, and shaping your response to the present, what you actually are doing is creating a new future for yourself. The more meaningful and closely aligned with your highest aspirations for your life you can make your present activities, the more beneficial and meaningful your life ought to be. When we notice our present moments, when we take time to really see what is meaningful, when we savor the good moments, when we intentionally use the best within us, we are stepping into the world as someone who is serious about helping shape a more welcoming and nurturing future for all. This is a really important aspect of living a meaningful life, and is of deep personal significance to me. We cannot have a meaningful existence if the way that we live hurts others, shuts doors to them, or in any way uses the other thinking, feeling, vital, striving expressions of life on this planet as mere springboards to our personal gratification. There is nothing meaningful about being a cancer cell, about being a microplastic or a poison, a virus, a parasite, or a choking cloud of pollution. There is only meaning in life and growth and mutual nurturance. As we dare to dream of a future, let us be brave and envision a future that can heal us and carry us, and others, to new elevations.

As with the “Present” section, your job here is to choose one of the following activities and implement it over the course of a week. Each of these activities is grounded in good research, and in some cases, the activity itself has demonstrated evidence of improving wellbeing among those who use it. So, feel confident in choosing whichever activity appeals to you the most – they’re all pretty dang good.

### Hope

In the eyes of positive psychology, hope is not some abstract, dreamy idea, it is really more a way of setting and planning to succeed at your goals. Read the article by CR Snyder (1995) on Hope if you can find it. Pay attention to how Snyder talks about hope as being something we can do automatically, at least as far as identifying things that we want to happen in the future. In Snyder’s view, hope is not pie-in-the-sky, someone-will-rescue-me-from-the-zombies fantasy, it is the way we try to organize ourselves to make that future happen! Hope is made up of two components. As Snyder says, “These components are the cognitive willpower or energy to get moving toward one’s goal (this is called the *agency* component) and the perceived ability to generate routes to get somewhere (this is called the *pathways* component).” This activity is focused on building up your agency and pathways capacities.

Instructions: Snyder (1995) gets pretty deep into the measurement of hope, but if you can access this article, skip down to the section about “Nurturing Hope” where he presents two sets of ideas. The first is about Clarifying Goals, and it describes brief nudges in setting better goals. For example, Snyder is not complimentary about vague ideas like “doing my best.” He argues that the ideal focus for hope is a goal that is vivid and fully describable. We want concrete, doable goals. It is helpful to choose goals that can be broken down into step-by-step subgoals. This latter breakdown also helps give us a sense of progress.

The second section is the most important for this activity. In Building or Rebuilding Hope or Agency, you get a list of activities that can build up Hope and keep it fit. If you can not access the article, here is a list of most of Snyder's suggestions: Learn to use self-talk about succeeding, recast difficulties as being relevant to strategy instead of lacking talent, think of setbacks as challenges not failures, recall your past successes, find role models, learn about other people's stories of success through social media or movies or books, find humor in being stuck, reward yourself of attaining a subgoal, gain education around specific skills that can help you tackle subgoals and larger goals, and take care of your physical self through physical activity and nutrition.

Choose 3 of these suggestions – you should be ones that you aren't already doing a lot. For example, if you almost always eat healthily, don't choose the 'eating properly' activity. Over the next week, use at least one of the 3 activities you chose. You can do the same one every day, or change from day to day depending on your mood. At the end of the day, write down which one you used and how you think it influenced your hope and pursuit of your goals.

A final note, part of Hope theory is the feedback loop that happens when we try to achieve a goal and either succeed or fail. If you really want to grow hope, it is important to take lessons away from either success or failure that help you build up your ability to feel you have agency and to identify pathways to where you want to go in life.

### Optimistic Explanatory Style

Like hope, most of us already have a preexisting idea of what optimism is. And, like hope, those ideas are usually not sharply defined enough to be useful in the science of positive psychology, so we need more precise definitions and models. Within positive psychology there are two main schools of thought surrounding the definition and conceptualization of optimism: dispositional optimism and attributional style. The main difference between the two schools of thought is that attributional style, based on Seligman's early work with learned helplessness as a model of depression (Abramson et al., 1978), recognizes optimism as a learned skill and not a stable personality trait. Attribution style (explanatory style) (Seligman, 1998) refers to the way in which one explains the causes and influences of previous positive and negative events in order to create expectancies about the future. Pessimists explain negative events by inferring internal, stable or global causes: *The event was caused by myself (internal), by something that is chronic (stable), or by something that is pervasive and will affect other situations as well (global)*. On the other hand, optimists explain negative events by inferring external, unstable or local causes: *The event was caused by something/someone other than myself (external), by something that will probably not persist (unstable) or by something that is probably limited to this specific circumstance (local)*. Optimists adopt unstable, external (leaving one's self-esteem intact) and specific (depending on circumstances) explanations for bad events. To be optimistic, we need to flip this script.

There are many health benefits from engaging in optimistic thinking, and this experiential activity encourages you to develop optimism as a skill and apply it in everyday life.

Instructions: Before you start, read Chapter 5 of Hefferon & Boniwell (2011; p.94-108) to get a better understanding of optimism and learn about the benefits associated with optimistic thinking. If you can't access this book, you'll just have to trust me that there are many physical, psychological, and

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even social benefits associated with being optimistic. Note that I said “being optimistic,” not being an optimist. Optimism is a skill you can learn. That is the purpose of this activity.

At the end of every day, reflect on everything that happened during the day and write down the reason why such event happened using Optimistic Explanatory Style.

- In what ways did you help bring about positive events? (internal attribution)
- In what ways was the cause of positive events something that is likely to happen again, and indeed, keep happening (stable attribution)
- In what ways is it likely that the positive events of the day show that life in general is positive? (global attribution)

The point of these attribution exercises is not to trick or hypnotize yourself into being a smiling optimist, but rather to practice looking for whatever data there is (and there usually is a LOT) that you are able to positively affect your life, that you are able to do so time and time again, and that life overall is pretty decent.

Reflect on your thoughts and feelings and set an intention to use Optimistic Explanatory Style to respond to events right in the moment they happen for the next day. Do this every day for a week.

### Curiosity

Curiosity is all about our openness to exploring new things. With all the variety that life and the world have to offer, keeping our eyes open is key to learning more about ourselves and others, finding new ways to enjoy life, and expanding our capabilities. One of the world’s leading experts on curiosity, Todd Kashdan, wrote a book a while ago in which he explored the research showing that curiosity can help us grow, and also help protect us from stagnating, feeling helpless from confusion, and feeling anxious or socially awkward.

If you have the chance to read Kashdan’s book, I think you will enjoy it. I give my students an excerpt from it that I think provides great tips for being more curious. He essentially provides 4 different approaches you can try: Find the Unfamiliar in the Familiar, Changing the Way We Remember Events, Leading and Motivating Others, and the general advice he includes in his Brief Primer on Practicing Curiosity in waking, talking, walking, and experiencing life. Here is a very brief description of each approach:

- Find the Unfamiliar in the Familiar – plan to engage in something that is not very appealing (Todd gives the examples of speed metal, free jazz, wine tasting, or Victorian poetry...it’s almost like he’s specifically targeting my ideal Friday night!), but when you are engaging in this activity instead of wasting energy hating it, search for three novel or unique things about it
- Changing Remembrances – plan to engage in something new and maybe even weird or unpleasant, but also plan to end the event by doing something you really love. So, if you hate a night of reading Victorian poetry to speed metal, plan to end the poetry slam with 20 minutes of your favorite literature or music, or even something simply yummy, like chocolate or a good stretching session.
- Leading and Motivating – this is a bit of a “Jedi Mind Trick” in that you are putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and trying to imagine some new challenge or jolt that would move someone else from a state of apathy or anxiety into wanting to learn more about a particular topic. Someone might think wine-tasting is snobby and feel terrible that the

flavor profile they receive is “grape.” What would be the next challenge for that person? Is it thinking of another familiar fruit flavor? Imagining what would be the next good curious step for another person sharpens our own tools for looking for the new and curious.

- Practicing Curiosity – Kashdan really encourages us to enter into life with no presumptions as a way to stoke curiosity. If we just walk through life assuming that everything fits our assumptions, are we really living? So, when you wake up, what new sensations to you encounter that you typically overlook? When you are walking around, how might you nudge your attention toward all sensations that are within your range, not just the ones you typically look for (e.g., don’t just sniff the air for evidence that the coffee has been brewed).

Instructions: Choose one of these 4 approaches every day for 1 week. You can do the same one every day, or change from day to day depending on your mood. Be creative and dedicated in how you apply your chosen approach to your day. Try to use that approach to leave your ‘curiosity switch’ in permanent on mode all day. At the end of the day, write down at least three new insights and experiences you had because you were more curious.

### Best Future Self

Research suggested that writing about self-regulatory topics can be associated with some health benefits (King, 2001). This experiential activity helps you explore the benefits of writing.

Instructions: Before you start, read King (2001) to get a better understanding of self-regulatory writing and learn about the benefits associated with such activity. If you cannot find this article, the emphasis is on our ability to self-regulate. By focusing our mental and motivational abilities on a vision of the future, we increase our capacity to hold that image of a better self in our minds. Instead of a vague notion like “I wish life was better,” writing fills in the details and we can begin to capture a detailed picture of how life would be better. The more details we have, the better we can create the motivational and behavioral bridges between the present and the future.

For a week, write for 20 minutes each day using this prompt: *“Think about your life in the future. Imagine that 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 all of your life dreams. Now, write about what you imagined.”*



## Other People

One of the most inspiring early leaders in positive psychology, Chris Peterson, was asked to summarize what we know about the science of human flourishing. His answer, in three words, has become something of a mantra for our field: Other People Matter. Other people determine our happiness by impacting us both negatively and positively, of course, but they also provide time-honored focal points for our efforts to live a good, meaningful life. It isn't just whether we have good people in our life—by all means we should—it also is reminding us that when we focus on ourselves, we create sad little spirals in our lives. Like a confused person waving to their own reflection in a hall of mirrors, if all we strive for is to make ourselves happy, our potential shrinks and gets fuzzier and fuzzier. We do need to respect and own our need to be happy and to set our own course in life, but we also need to recognize both that our course involves other people and that we will journey to more exciting, enduring, and noble destinations if we consider our relationships and connections to others.

This set of activities invites you to use skills of the present or of the future to broaden your horizons just a little bit. Undoubtedly you currently are connected to other people, and are trying hard to be a good person in society and in your relationships. I hope that you have good relationships, and good people in your life, supporting you and welcoming your support. We all need the chance to be built up, and to help build up others. These activities only seek to add a little extra dimension to what you already are doing.

### Gratitude – Three Good Things

Gratitude is known to be a powerful source of psychological, physical, and relational benefits. Perhaps because of this, gratitude interventions have been one of the most robust and effective positive psychology interventions developed. In Seligman et al.'s (2005) study, people who engaged in this gratitude activity for one week experienced increases in happiness and decreases in symptoms of depression for up to 6 months.

*Instructions:* Before you start, read Seligman et al. (2005) to get a better understanding of positive psychology interventions. This step is not strictly necessary, of course, but this was an important study for trying to show how people who wanted to access information about happiness on the internet could engage in positive psychology interventions with indications that several activities improved their mood, life satisfaction, and depressive and anxious feelings. The activity chosen here was one of the activities that appeared to get these positive outcomes among many of the people who enrolled in the study.

For one week at the end of each day before going to sleep, write down three things that went well during the day. The three things you list can be relatively small ("My roommate washed my dishes") or large ("My sister just gave birth to a healthy baby girl") in importance.

Under each of the three things on your list, write down why you think the positive event happened. For example, you might speculate that your roommate washed your dishes because "he is very kind," or because "I cleared up his dishes last time."



## Gratitude – Gratitude Letters

Similar to the three good things activity, writing a letter of gratitude was an effective positive psychology intervention. In Seligman et al.'s (2005) study, people were asked to write one letter of gratitude, then deliver it in person to the intended recipient. People who engaged in this gratitude activity for one week experienced increases in happiness and decreases in symptoms of depression for up to a month.

*Instructions:* It is not always possible to actually meet in person with folks to whom we owe an expression of gratitude. Because of this, I have adapted this activity to make hand-delivering the letter optional, while still trying to provide the potential benefits. I traded the intensity of actually meeting one person for the repetition and versatility of writing out a gratitude letter for seven different people. If you want to schedule a videochat with any of the people to whom you write letters, feel free to do so, then you can email the letter to them or read it aloud.

Gratitude is all about us acknowledging that we have received a benefit due to the influence or actions of someone or something else, even though we may not have earned that benefit. In this activity we are focusing on the ways in which someone else has done something that has benefitted our lives and which we did not strictly earn. For example, we might be grateful for a French teacher who went above and beyond to help us learn more of the language, but we probably wouldn't feel "grateful" for an app that we practiced every day in order to speak French better. The difference here is that our learning would not have been as possible without the teacher in the first case, whereas we really were the ones putting in the effort in the second case (though I am thankful for app developers in a general sense). Hopefully that is clear. Even if it is not clear, though, do not get too caught up in the details. If you want to express gratitude to someone, don't let me stand in the way with my annoying definitions!

Every day for a week, write a letter of gratitude to someone who had been especially kind to you but had never been properly thanked. By the end of this week, you should have seven different letters. If you want to, and can think of a safe way to do so, please feel free to share any or all of your letters through videochat with the people you are thanking.

## Kindness

One definition of kindness focuses on how we behave when we choose to be kind. "*Kind acts are behaviours that benefit other people, or make others happy. They usually involve some effort on our part.*" (Kerr et al., 2014). Performing kind acts for other people is a research-backed contributor to happiness and well-being. Usually, research suggests that the benefits of being kind to others are actually greater for the person doing the kind act than the person receiving the kindness, even though both parties report benefits. Other researchers point out that kindness is not only about acts, but also about our motivations and our ability to recognize when we do kind acts for others (Otake et al., 2006). This activity is designed to help you better recognize the kind acts you do for others, and hopefully improve your motivation to be kind.

*Instructions:* Before you start, read Kerr et al. (2014) to see how they conducted their research, showing that both appreciating the kindness we receive from others (i.e., gratitude) and doing kind acts for others created positive outcomes for participants. We4 will be focusing on doing kind acts  
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for others in this activity. For one week, keep a daily log of your kind acts. At the end of EACH DAY, write down at least one kind act that you did for another person, and which you did intentionally. (Note: You are certainly encouraged to be kind to animals, the planet, and so on, but make sure you do a kind act at least once for a human.)

### Compassion

This is a long one, but do not feel intimidated. Compassion just happens to be a little bit complicated, but is so worth it.

Compassion is when we have a sympathetic awareness and concern for others' distress or suffering together with a desire to alleviate it. Compassion is an important value in nearly all cultures, religions, and spiritual traditions. However, it is not always easy to allow ourselves to feel or act on compassion. Sometimes we worry about whether the cost of helping alleviate others' distress or suffering is too high. Sometimes we worry about whether having greater sympathetic awareness and concern for others will cause us our own emotional pain. Sometimes we confuse compassion with disregarding or condoning the harmful actions of others, such as when we might avoid feeling compassion for a criminal who is imprisoned because we do not want to seem as if we think committing crimes is ok. Despite all of these legitimate concerns, feeling compassion is an important part of wellbeing, and of forming connections that enable us to live and work together as whole, healthy people. This activity is designed to help you learn a little bit about how to more intentionally cultivate and manage compassion.

*Instructions:* Before you start, read Jazaieri et al. (2012) for an overview of compassion and a description of research that shows that people can cultivate compassion. Their study used a large amount of formal meditation practice to help improve compassion. This activity will be somewhat different in that it will help you form a mindset that makes feeling compassion easier. Your activity will be to choose a person or group of people who you do not normally think about very often, but who you are aware are facing challenges, are in distress, or are suffering. Some examples might include refugees, victims of violence, those who have lost their homes to fires or flooding, people who are caught in substance addiction, people who have lost loved ones to death, or people who are suffering through war or famine around the world, or those especially affected by the pandemic. If you already frequently feel compassion, you may want to identify a more challenging group, such as people with passionate political or religious views that conflict with yours, criminals in prison, or a friend or family member who has recently hurt you while caught in their own suffering. As with all of these groups, the point is not to forgive or forget what they may or may not have done, but simply to bring forward feelings of compassion for them.

There are two tools you can use to change how much compassion you feel. *To increase compassion*, pay attention and really think about how much the people/person you identified is or has been suffering. *To decrease compassion*, pay attention and think about what they could have done to avoid, get out of, or end the situation that is causing them suffering. For example, to increase compassion for someone who has damaged important relationships because of substance addiction, you might focus on the suffering that drives the substance use despite all of the deep costs that behavior creates, and how miserable it must be to feel helpless as those important relationships are damaged because of the addiction. To decrease compassion, you might focus on

all of the choices that person has made to sustain addiction, all the resources that could be used to get help, and so on.

For this activity, you will spend 15 minutes EACH DAY for one week working *to increase compassion*. You will think about and then write down a summary of how you perceive that person/people to be suffering. Ideally, each day of the week is spent cultivating compassion.

It is important that if you begin to experience distress yourself, you can shift your attention to the control they have over their own actions and fate in order to lessen feelings of compassion and the distress it is causing you. It is important that you remain safe throughout this process of cultivating compassion, and that might mean decreasing compassion if it is causing you too much suffering yourself. Please write a summary of this experience as well. If you do need to take time to decrease compassion on one day, please try again the next day to focus on suffering and increase compassion.

This is a complicated activity, so to summarize:

1. Identify a person or group of people who you think are suffering, but who you really don't think about much or usually feel compassion for.
2. Spend 15 minutes EACH DAY for a week focusing on their distress and suffering in order to increase your compassion for them, writing up a summary of your reflections each day.
3. If you start to experience distress or suffering yourself, take a day off and decrease suffering by focusing on the control or choice your person or group of people could have made to avoid the situation causing them to suffer, writing up a summary of this reflection, too, and then returning the next day or as soon as you are able to increasing compassion again.

## The Wrap Up

This is not a self-hope book or any kind of replacement for therapy or counseling. This is only an invitation to you, an invitation to take a few steps toward living the life you want, a life that creates flourishing for yourself and for others. If this is your first time cycling through the activities in this plan, then you might feel you are left with a trio of logs of activities that might have felt fun or worthwhile, but might nonetheless feel a bit disconnected. It can be tricky to connect all the dots, and also to remember that the most effective use of these activities is in the service of trying to make changes in your life that are motivating and of high value. In this wrap up, you are invited to connect those dots and to take a look at where you've taken yourself.

Recall that one part of this plan is taking psychological surveys on happiness, meaning, and other positive psychology characteristics. Now, complete these surveys one last time. Then pull together all your scores and see if anything changed. Is there any evidence that you are happier, feel life is more meaningful? Are you more grateful, for example? It is OK if you do not see much change. As I said before, if changing your life was easy, we'd all be perfect by now. The important thing is to consider whether your effort has been worth it. Have you learned anything new? Did you have conversations with people that you wouldn't have had before? Did you notice or appreciate anything about yourself, others, or the world that you'd been overlooking a bit lately? Do you feel that you've developed any tools that you can use again in the future?

I hope that your work on this plan yielded greater happiness and meaning for you, but I also hope that you feel you made progress toward your goal. This plan concludes with two last steps that are intended to help you evaluate what you have accomplished with your time and effort. In many ways, these last two steps are just as important as your behavior change planning and the three activities you did, so please try to do them.

I would invite you to circle back to the beginning, and see if it might be appealing for you to run through the three activity cycle again. Much of our success in life is learning what works and using it often. Given that all of these activities are designed to help you feel motivated, valued, worthy, helpful, and connected, I think they are worth using often.

## A Letter to Your Past Self

Now is a good time to hunt down that note you wrote to yourself at the beginning of this journey. What is it like to read it? What thoughts, feelings, or ideas come to mind?

To link the ends of the circle, I'd like you to write a letter to your past self. The letter is a summary of your journey, your impressions of the goal you chose, what it was like to engage in the activities, what you learned about yourself and others through this process, and whether any of these activities seem like something you'd like to keep doing.

This also is a good time to take stock of your work. Take a moment to write a summary of how you think you have progressed toward your goal. Include this summary in your letter to your past self. Any stretch of our lives is valuable. How many times have you looked at a past hairstyle, romantic partner, favorite song or movie, or past phase of your life and wondered "WHAT WAS I THINKING?!?!?" Here is your chance to answer that question about an important phase of your life. You can make this letter a record of what you were thinking at this time in your life.

## Pass It On

The original idea behind this plan was to try to take the activities I have given to people over many years of teaching, leading workshops, and speaking and turn them into a guide resource for people. There seems to be a real thirst for greater depth and joy in life, yet people often do not know where to turn. I've been so lucky in my life to be able to learn the skills of using science to explore what really seems to help people live better lives, more fulfilling lives, more meaningful lives. It is up to you to decide whether this little guide is helpful in that regard, but it was put together with the best of intentions.

I've benefitted over the years from people sharing their expertise, well wishes, kindness, and activities that have helped them flourish. I hope that this little guide can help you flourish, and that you would also share it. Are there people in your life who are struggling, or are interested in more happiness, or who are searching for meaning? Who might benefit from a thoughtful introduction to this positive psychology guide?

This last activity is both about reflection on your own journey and also about deepening your connections to others. As you consider who might like to try out this guide, you are engaging in empathy, taking what you know about the people in your life and imagining them reading these same words someday. It's a gift to have those people in your life, and if you are thinking about them, your life is a gift to theirs. If this plan might help, pass it on.

## A Closing Note

Thank you for taking a look at this plan. I hope you feel like you have made some progress toward goals that are important to you. I started putting this plan together in March, and write this note on March 22, 2020. My mind has been scattered and battered, so I hope there aren't any huge errors, and that you can look past any sloppiness.

The world seems so confusing and scary right now as we face a true global pandemic. Many of us are stuck in our homes, far away from loved ones, trying to keep a brave face for our own sake and the sake of others. We are probably the lucky ones.

We're trying to help our friends, family, and neighbors stay healthy and optimistic, and we're trying to adjust to a future that remains murky and probably very different than the one we were preparing for just a few months ago. It remains as important as ever to take care of our health and make sure that our actions do not risk the health of others. However, in order to get through hard times, we also need to feel that it is worth it. What makes struggling through hard times worth it? This is really another way of asking what makes life worth living. I believe that a life is worth living when it is meaningful, when we feel we are actors with some ability to shape our futures and make sense of our lives. Life is never anything other than a journey from one place to another, from one time to another, so the most important elements are always going to be our perspective on our journey and the people we are traveling with. My hope for this plan is that it gives you some new tools on your journey, helps you refine or find new ways of working with the tools you already have, and helps create ways to become more connected with others even as we are told to keep physical distance between us.

If there is any message that a global pandemic can shout in our faces, it is that we are all in this together. On top of that, I would add that as we all know, life is precious and fragile. We need each other, and we need a vision of some kind of brighter future to lead us forward. I hope I can count on you to help build that future. You can count on me.

Wishing you a life of meaning and purpose,  
Mike

Michael F. Steger, PhD

Michael is the founder and Director of the Center for Meaning and Purpose, as well as being a professor of psychology at Colorado State University. He also serves as CEO for Meaning and Purpose Resources, Ltd., a consultancy. He is endlessly curious about learning how to create a life worth living, and this focus is the inspiration for his research. He has spent the better part of two decades studying the vital role that meaning and purpose play in our work, health, relationships, growth, and happiness. Mike is a sought-after speaker around the world due to his wide-ranging expertise on meaning, purpose, and positive psychology, presented with humor, humility, empathy, and passion. He has published more than 120 scientific papers, including influential theory and research that has profoundly shaped the way the field understands and measures meaning in life and work purpose and meaning, as well as three published books, *Designing Positive Psychology*, *Purpose and Meaning in the Workplace*, and *The Handbook of Positivity and Strengths-Based Approaches at Work*. He always looks for opportunities to teach and collaborate with others, and has worked with companies, non-profits, and schools to help them develop tools to nurture meaning. He gratefully receives daily lessons about authenticity, humility, and making a difference from his partner and two children.



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