**Self help and positive psychology: Can happiness be learned?**

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**Abstract**

Within positive psychology well-being (happiness) is main criteria for positive functioning and is generally considered the worthwhile life goal. The benefits of happiness are evident across a wide range of domains including social relationships, health and longevity, work and income, and benefits at the societal level. Happiness is related to various positive life outcomes with evidence that it can be both their cause and consequence

In addition to genetic and environmental factors, intentional activities and practices play important role in individual’s chronic happiness level. Positive psychology interventions (PPIs) are treatment methods or intentional activities that aim to cultivate positive feelings, behaviours or cognitions. In last decade a great number of studies documented positive effects of these activities on the happiness level. Recently, however, researchers began shifting focus from whether PPIs can increase well-being to methods of implementation, long-term sustainability and various personal, situational and cultural factors. Some warned about possible dangers including incomplete understanding of human happiness, flawed attempts to translate research into effective practice and the paradoxical effect of making people unhappier. Before we have a complete understanding of how these activities work, and for whom they work, positive psychology-based activities should be disseminated with caution.

Key words: positive psychology, self-help, happiness, well-being, interventions

**The human pursuit of happiness**

Since ancient times people have been speculating over the questions about happiness, its causes and consequences. Many of the great philosophies and religions attempted to deal with it in order to help both individuals and communities achieve greater joy and fulfilment. In Nichomachean Ethics, Aristotle claims, that the aim of life is eudaimonia (or happiness) that he defined as virtuous activity in accordance with reason. Socrates and Plato also believed that individuals become happy by pursuing a virtuous life. Later, John Stuart Mill argued that pleasure and freedom from pain are the only desirable ends for people. He postulated “Greatest Happiness Principle", saying that we should seek the richest amount of happiness in the greatest extent possible, not just for the individual but for the mankind as well. Thomas Jefferson even declared "the pursuit of happiness" as one of the basic human rights. In the twentieth century Maslow and other humanistic psychologists based their studies on healthy, creative individuals focusing on the topics such as self-actualization, love, creativity, growth, peak experience, and similar topics.

Within positive psychology, that emerged at the beginning of this millennium, well-being is main criteria for positive functioning and is generally considered the worthwhile goal to be pursued in life. In this article the term *happiness* is used, as a common-sense, lay representation of well-being.

**What is happiness**

Although, there is no consensus on the definition of well-being, this term usually refers to optimal psychological functioning and experience. Current research on well-being has been derived from two general approaches (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The first is hedonic approach, supporting the idea that happiness is equivalent to subjective experiences of pleasure and satisfaction. The second is the eudaimonic approach, which is focused on meaningful goal pursuits and self-realization. Within this approach well-being is defined in terms of the degree to which a person is fully functioning. Recently, attempts have been made to recognize the benefits of both hedonic and eudaimonic approach (Keyes & Annas, 2009) and the term flourishing have been used to include both aspects of wellbeing.

However, the dominant conception of well-being in current psychological literature is the notion of subjective well-being (SWB) derived primarily from hedonic approach. SWB is considered a multidimensional construct, encompassing how people evaluate their own lives in terms of both affective and cognitive explanations (Diener et al., 1999). Affective component of SWB relates to how we feel about our life and cognitive component to how we think about it. As an operational definition, SWB is most often interpreted to mean experiencing a high level of positive affect, a low level of negative affect, and a high degree of satisfaction with one’s life.

**Why is it good to be happy**

The benefits of high SWB are evident across a wide range of domains such as social relationships, work and income, health and longevity and others (for reviews see Huppert, 2009; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). However, majority of studies in this field are correlational so it is not always possible to determine whether happiness is the cause or the consequence of aforementioned life benefits. But, some longitudinal and experimental studies give evidence that happiness is for certain, at least in some cases, their cause.

Longitudinal and prospective studies of the relationship between happiness and income are much less extensive than the correlational ones, but they are more persuasive regarding causal direction. In longitudinal studies happiness has been found to predict success in social and work settings as well as in health and longevity (for review see Jacobs Bao & Lyubomirski, 2014; Lyubomirski et al., 2005). Both long-term happiness and short-term positive affects tend to precede the desirable characteristics, resources, and behaviours with which they are correlated. For example, happiness raises the probability that the person will eventually get married and have higher marital satisfaction. It also predicts higher social and recreational activities. Young people who are happy at age of 18 have higher probability of obtaining a job later in life as well as having higher job satisfaction. Several work-related outcomes have been found to be related to positive affect, i. e. less absenteeism at work, higher self-rated work productivity, better supervisor evaluations and higher income.

Review of the experimental studies revealed that positive emotions promote development of sociability and activity, altruism, liking of self and others, strong bodies and immune systems, and effective conflict resolution skills (for revew see Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). In summary, it could be concluded that happiness is related to various positive life outcomes with evidence that it can be both their cause and consequence.

**Can happiness level be changed**

In several longitudinal studies levels of SWB have been found to be relatively stable over time (for review see Schimmack & Oishi, 2005). These studies suggest that certain life events and circumstances can have initial strong impact on individual happiness level but, due to habituation or adaptation to the new circumstances, have no lasting influence. So, after some time people tend to return to an affective neutral point (according to “hedonic treadmill” principle, Brickman & Campbell, 1971), or to their individual set-point of happiness (Headey, 2008). Evidence from twin studies suggest that well-being levels are strongly influenced by genetics with heritability estimates ranging from 36% to 56% (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). These results support the set-point of happiness principle. On the other hand, environmental influences including income, education, unemployment, religion, exercise, marriage/divorce, friendship and economic/political environment explain 16–30% of the variance in SWB, leaving the large part of environmental variance in SWB unexplained (for review see Luhman et al., 2012). Layous and Lyubomirsky (2014) argue that people can choose how to think and  behave in their daily lives and that these differences in thinking and behaviour can partly explain variance in SWB.

Summarizing previous studies Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) proposed that a person’s chronic happiness level is determined by three factors: a genetically based happiness set point (accounting for approximately 50% of the individual differences in chronic happiness), life circumstances that affect happiness (10%), and intentional activities and practices (the remaining 40%). Although we are not able to influence the set point of happiness and often neither our life circumstances, factors under voluntary control can be improved upon.

**Is there empirically supported self-help**

The number of studies dealing with psychological interventions for increasing happiness has shown enormous growth in last ten years. In spite of that, there is still no common definition of a “positive intervention,” Also, a single, empirically-based theoretical framework that unifies positive interventions, has not yet been developed. Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009, p. 468) define positive psychology interventions (PPI) as “treatment methods or intentional activities that aim to cultivate positive feelings, behaviours or cognitions”. According to this definition methods and activities aimed at fixing or remedying something pathological or deficient are not be included among positive psychological interventions.

All positive psychological interventions are simple, take relatively little time and can be self-administered. In positive psychology interventions participants are usually randomly assigned to control and experimental groups. Those in experimental groups practice one or several activities created to increase some aspect of well-being while activities for “controls” are neutral regarding its potential for raising well-being. Before the intervention, participants complete several questionnaires, practice the activity for some predefined time period ranging from one to six weeks, and then complete post-intervention questionnaires. In some cases, participants may complete one or more long-term follow up questionnaires as well.

A great number of positive psychology activities aimed at improving happiness have been developed and tested. Parks et al., (2012) attempted to classify positive interventions according to the distinction between pleasant, engaged and meaningful life proposed by Peterson et al. (2005).

Activities in the area of pleasant life focus on building pleasure. A great number of studies showed positive effects of these activities on the happiness level (for review see Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013). They include i.e. counting one’s blessings, writing letters expressing gratitude to someone, writing three positive events that happened during the day, meditatig on positive feelings towards self and others and savouring pleasurable momentary experiences.

Interventions for building engagement are focused on building strengths (positive personality traits) and engaging in social connections. Typical strengths intervention involve their identification, use, and development. Seligman et al., (2005) found that these interventions resulted in increases in happiness and decreases in depressive symptoms. It seems that knowing one’s strengths is not enough and that using them is necessary condition.

Engaging in social contacts include activities such as performing kind acts (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, et al., 2005) more active-constructive responding (Gable et al., 2006) or forgiving. Forgiveness interventions have been studied including both process-based models and smaller scale interventions such as benefit writing. One study showed that believing in benefits of forgiving is positively related to well-being (Rijavec et al., 2013).

The Sin and Lyubomirsky’ (2009) meta-analysis strongly supports the overall efficacy of positive interventions. This analysis of 51 positive interventions revealed that positive interventions significantly increase well-being (mean r = .29) and alleviate depressive symptoms (mean r = .31). Another meta-analysis (Bolier et al., 2013) revealed standardized mean difference of 0.34 for subjective well-being, 0.20 for psychological well-being and 0.23 for depression suggesting small effects for positive psychology interventions. Effects were smaller after three to six months follow-up, but still significant for both subjective and psychological well-being. These results indicate that effects of positive psychology activities are fairly sustainable.

**New challenges in the area of positive interventions**

In last decade the aforementioned studies demonstrated the overall efficacy of positive psychology interventions. However, recently, researchers began to fine-tune this literature by shifting focus from whether PPIs can increase well-being to methods of implementation, the long-term sustainability and various personal, situational and cultural factors.

***Method of implementation***

As previously mentioned positive psychology interventions are effective for increasing well-being but their effectiveness depend on method of implementation, specifically time and dosage. For example, counting your blessings activity increased well-being if people counted their blessings once a week, but not if they did it more than three times a week (Froh et al., 2009). In a study by Lyubomirsky, Sheldon et al., (2005) it was found that doing several acts of kindness at once resulted in higher levels of happiness and lower levels of negative affect and stress. However, the group in which participants spread out their acts of kindness did not report any significant improvement in well-being. In a further study, variying the acts of kindness resulted in larger boosts in well-being compared to repeating the same kind of acts each week (Tkach, 2006). So, although it is evident that happiness can be increased through intentional activities, the question when and how these activities should be undertaken remains to be answered.

***Personal and situational factors***

Personal factors include variables such as motivation to become happier, personality traits, initial affective state and various sociodemographic characteristics. Studies suggested that people who are motivated to be happier and put more effort in activity benefit more from it (Lybomirsky et al., 2011). Individuals who score higher on extraversion and openess to experience are especially prone to benefit from positive activities ([Senf & Liau, 2012](http://cdp.sagepub.com/content/22/1/57.full?patientinform-links=yes&legid=spcdp;22/1/57" \l "ref-32)) as well as those who are low in positive affect (Froh et al., 2009).

It is possible that certain positive activities might be more effective for certain types of people. Layous and Lyubomirski (2014, p. 486) argue “that the greatest gains in well-being from practicing positive activities will emerge when the specific intervention format matches the individual preferences or characteristics of the person (i.e., the degree of person-activity fit).” When individuals engaged in preferred positive activities they benefited more and were more prone to continue with this activity after the study was over (Schueller, 2011).

Sociodemografic variables such as age and gender were also researched in relation to positive interventions. Results demonstrated that men were less likely to benefit from expressing gratutude (Kashdan et al., 2009) and that older people benefit as much as younger ones (Prover et al,. 2014). In one study with fourth graders it was found that positive psychology activities were effective for raising optimism for girls, but not for boys (Ivanković & Rijavec, 2012)

Research on the role of person-activity fit in raising happiness is still at the beginning as well as our understanding how the match between activities and individuals doing these activities might lead to greatest benefits for them.

***Positive psychology interventions in different cultures***

Christopher et al., (2008) argue that positive psychology seems to prescribe individualistic ideals and values that are not shared by collectivistic cultures that are predominant in the world’s population. In addition to that, the wealth of the country is often neglected. For example, well-documented finding that intrinsic life aspiration contribute to well-being while extrinsic ones often detracts from it (Kasser & Ryan, 2001), may not be valid in less wealthy and transitional countries. Research from Croatia and other, less rich countries (such as Russia, China, Hungary and Macedonia) suggest that striving for extrinsic aspirations is not negatively related to well-being (for review see Brdar et al. 2008 ). These findings suggest caution in generalizing results from positive psychology activities as well. Some activities seem to be beneficial universally. For example, in a sample of 136 countries (representing 95% of the world’s adult population) it was found that prosocial spending is consistently associated with greater happiness. In experiment testing causal relationship between prosocial spending and happiness the effect was conformed within two very different countries, Canada and Uganda (Aknin et al. 2013). However, effects of some activities might not be the same for different cultures. In one study (Layous et al., 2013) the effect of practicing gratitude or kindness was moderated by culture. South Korean participants benefitted significantly less from practicing gratitude than did U.S. participants, while similar increases were found for both samples when performing kind acts. Boehm et al., (2011) state that Westerners might gain more from positive activities since they value and express happiness more. Future studies need to continue to investigate the cultural and economic factors, that might impact the efficacy of positive activities.

***Positive psychology interventions and real life***

How long the effects of positive psychology activities last? Studies showed that some activities have more lasting effects (such as Three good things, Seligman et al., 2005) while others result in strong initial burst of happiness which does not last for long (such as Gratitude letter and Gratitude visit, Seligman et al., 2005).

However, the crucial factor seems to be continuation of activity after the study is over. Several studies have demonstrated that people who engage in positive activities after the prescribed study period continue to show improvements in well-being over a control group (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010). If a person stops doing activities, she or he will probably slip back to previous levels of lower well-being. Intentionality and effort toward are major contributors to their efficacy (Lyubomirsky, et al., 2011). If a person stops trying, the effect will gradually dissapear.

The dissemination of positive psychological interventions for self-help is also important issue. Individuals interested in these interventions should have access to evidence-based strategies to increase their happiness. This access must be financially and logistically practical (Parks et al., 2012). It includes classes, workshops, books, and modern technologies such as Internet sites and mobile applications. Parks and Szanto (2013) documented that self-help books are one important vehicle by which PPIs can be successfully delivered to consumers. In their study, in a 6 months follow up, a positive psychology-based self-help book was more effective in raising life-satisfaction and lowering depression than a cognitive-behavioral self-help book.

**Tha dark side of positive psychology interventions: can we do harm?**

As already mentioned, the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions depends on method of implementation and various personal and situation factors that can make some of the activities less effective or even ineffective. But can with do harm with positive psychology interventions?

In 2007. Spence warned about possible dangers in this area including simplification of empirical work, insufficient understanding about human happiness, inadequate attempts to translate research into effective practice and the paradoxical effect of making people sometimes unhappier rather than happier. Held (2002) pointed to the “dark” side effect of positive psychology when victims of unfortunate circumstances are blamed for their unhappiness. They are expected to show optimism, strengths and willpower and if they fail to do it – this is their own fault. Several studies doubted the efficacy of certain positive psychology intervention as well. For example, focusing on strengths may encourage individuals to think of strengths as permanent and unchangeable and in turn decrease the individual’s motivation to improve (Diener et al., 2011). In addition to that, for certain people certain positive activities may be ineffective or even harmful (Sergeant & Mongrain, 2011) or too high level of happiness can produce maladaptive outcomes (for a review see Gruber et al., 2011).

Before we have a complete understanding of how these activities work, and for whom they work, positive psychology-based activities should be disseminated with caution.

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**Sažetak**

U okviru pozitivne psihologije, blagostanje (sreća) je glavni kriterij pozitivnog funkcionisanja i uglavnom se smatra vrednim životnim ciljem. Pozitivne posledice sreće dokazane su u različitim domenama uključujući socijalne odnose, zdravlje i dužinu života, posao i prihode, a pozitivne posledice postoje i na nivou celog društva. Sreća je povezana sa različitim pozitivnim životnim ishodima, a može biti njihov uzrok ali i posledica.

Uz genetske faktore i faktore okoline, namerne aktivnosti igraju važnu ulogu u kroničnoj razini sreće pojedinca. Pozitivne intervencije su metodi tretmana ili namerne aktivnosti čiji cilj je kultivirati pozitivna osećanja, ponašanja i kognicije. U zadnjih desetak godina u velikom broju istraživanja dokazani su pozitivni efekti ovakvih aktivnosti na nivo sreće. U zadnje vreme, istraživači su preusmerili fokus sa pitanja da li pozitivne intervencije povećavaju blagostanje na metode implementacije, trajnost efekata te različite lične, situacione u kulturalne faktore. Neki upozoravaju in a moguće opasnosti uključujući nepotpuno razumevanje ljudske sreće, pogrešne pokušaje primene znanstvenih istraživanja u efikasnu praksu i paradoksalni efekt činjenja ljudi nesretnijima. Prije nego u potpunosti shvatimo kako te aktivnosti funkcioniraju potreban je oprez kod njihovog korištenja u praksi.

Ključne reči: pozitivna psihologija, samo-pomoć, sreća, blagostanje, intervencije