

Two Simple Exercises To Help You Think More Positively

People are often held back by their negative, maladaptive thoughts. One common way to tackle them is to learn to [identify, challenge, and replace](#) them directly. Something else that helps cut them off at the source is taking steps to shift your overall thinking in a more positive direction (I'll quickly note that 'thinking more positively' doesn't mean you have to become some blissed out hippie who denies reality and never works on or learns from their problems). In another article I covered some [standard lifestyle changes](#) that can improve your general mood. In this article I'll cover two straightforward written exercises.

It's human nature to focus on the negative. It makes sense to a degree. We need to notice what's wrong and think about how to fix it. However, if this tendency goes too far it can make us unnecessarily insecure or depressed. We can counteract it by taking time to explicitly remind ourselves of the many things that are going well in our lives. The two exercises below are built on this principle.

The What Went Well Exercise

I first read about this exercise in the Positive Psychology book *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being* by Dr. Martin Seligman. Studies have shown it to be effective in reducing feelings of depression.

Instructions

1. Before you go to bed set aside a few minutes to write down three things that went well for you that day. It doesn't matter if it's in a physical journal, a Google Docs document, or your phone. Use whatever method is most convenient for you.

The items don't need to be earth shattering in importance. They could be about anything, not just your social goals. All kinds of bad things could have happened to you that day, but the exercise isn't interested in them. Some examples:

- Went on a bike ride and explored some new trails.
- Saw an interesting new movie with my friends.
- Did well on my Calculus exam, despite being nervous about it.
- Had a nice chat with my mom on the phone.
- Had a nice fun date night with my husband.
- I asked Stephanie out on a date. She said no, but at least I tried.
- Got a big chunk of that project at work out of the way.

2. Besides each item write a quick explanation about why it happened. For example:

- The weather was nice and I took advantage of it. I spent time researching new trails to try out. I know I need to make time to get out and do things on my own.
- I accepted their invitation to hang out. They have good taste in films.
- I studied hard. Doing well in school is important to me.
- We make time for each other, even though our son demands a lot of our attention.
- I feel if you like someone you should take a shot, and being rejected is ultimately better than not knowing what they think of you and pining away for them for months on end.

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- I decided it was worth working hard today to get the worst of it over with.

3. Commit to trying the exercise for at least two weeks. If it doesn't do anything for you, feel free to stop. If not, keep going.

My personal experiences with the exercise

For what it's worth, I can personally vouch for this exercise. I tried it out when I first read about it in early 2012 and I'm still doing it. Of course it didn't single-handedly transform my life or make me never think another negative thought, but I can confidently say it's had a positive impact on my mood and worldview:

- Within a week of starting I started noticing an effect on my thinking. Because the exercise only asked me to think about and record the good parts of each day, my mind gave them that much more weight.
- Even when something bad happened I didn't dwell on it as much, or even started focusing on the silver lining, which I could write down for the exercise. Since the negative events weren't being permanently captured they faded from my consciousness more quickly.
- Every day ended on a little positive note.
- After about two weeks I started to get this feeling that I was riding this streak of success-filled days. After all, I had a written record to prove it.
- At times the exercise changed my behavior. If I was having a lazy, uneventful day I'd think, "I should go out and do something fun, or get some work done, so I'll have some decent points to write down for tonight."
- When I encountered the exercise I misread the instructions and thought it said to give a reason why each event happened, but based on what I did personally, through my actions or personality, to bring it about. It was a happy accident, because it made me focus on the choices and character traits I had that allowed me to bring positive things into my life. If you do the exercise you may want to try this variation.
- The exercise inspired me to try similar ideas, like taking some time on New Year's Day to come up with a list of every success and highlight from the previous year.

Things I'm Grateful For exercise

I've heard a few versions of this exercise over the years. I find the What Went Well exercise helps you find the positive in the events that happen in your day-to-day life. This one is a bit more general in scope. Gratitude has also been linked to improved mood. As you read them they may seem a little trite, but they're effective.

Ongoing version

Like the exercise above, this provides a continuous drip of positive thinking.

1. Before you turn in for the night write down three things you're grateful for. They don't need to be related to anything that happened to you that day, just anything you can think of. The items don't need to be deep or poetic, just something you appreciate having in your life. Some examples:

I'm grateful that...

- ...I have my health.
- ...I live in a safe, prosperous country.

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- ...there are so many good video games coming out right now.
- ...I have such awesome friends.
- ...that I have the time and freedom to work on my social issues.
- ...I'm relatively financially secure.
- ...mangos are in season.
- ...that Mad Men exists and is such a well-written, nuanced show.

2. Again, commit to trying the exercise for at least two weeks. If it doesn't float your boat, don't worry about quitting. If you find it helpful, continue with it as long as you'd like.

One-off version

Sit down, and in one session write out as many things as possible that you're grateful for. You'll likely get more results for your mood when you remind yourself of these things daily, but this version is good for giving you a quick shift in perspective. It can help you see the bigger picture if you're in a spot where life isn't going your way.