

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

Teaching Students About How Simple, Positive Activities Can Increase Well-Being by David G. Myers

[Lyubomirsky, S., & Layous, K. \(2013\). How do simple positive activities increase well-being? Current Directions in Psychological Science, 22, 57–62.](#)

For those of us who have engaged the scientific pursuit of happiness, the question is familiar: *To what extent—and how—can people increase their happiness?*

As twin studies show, genes influence happiness. Moreover, genes also influence happiness-predictive traits, such as extraversion. But that’s not the whole story, note happiness researchers Sonja Lyubomirsky and Kristin Layous (2013). Happiness is a malleable disposition. Much as our cholesterol level is biologically influenced, yet modifiable through diet and exercise, so also we can tweak our happiness with intentional actions.

Lyubomirsky, a leading positive psychologist, offers practical steps toward happiness in her engaging and science-smart guides: *The How of Happiness* and the just-published *The Myths of Happiness*. To become happier, she advises, live as happy people do—cultivate optimism, nurture supportive relationships, learn to forgive, strengthen your body with exercise and sleep, and become religiously or spiritually engaged.

All this is worth doing, note Lyubomirsky and Layous, because “happiness not only feels good, it is good. Happy people have more stable marriages, stronger immune systems, higher incomes, and more creative ideas than their less happy peers.”

And good news: positive activities—“simple, intentional, and regular practices meant to mimic the myriad healthy thoughts and behaviors associated with naturally happy people”—have repeatedly been shown to increase happiness. This is especially so under conditions that stimulate positive thoughts and emotions.

This positive-activity-produce-positive-feelings principle coincides with other familiar psychological science principles:

- *Attitudes follow behavior*: When we *act as if* we hold certain attitudes, we soon may.
- *The facial (and bodily) feedback effect*: The “path to cheerfulness,” noted William James (1911), “is to sit up cheerfully, to look round cheerfully, and to act and speak as if

cheerfulness were already there.” As experiments show, our expressions and postures don’t just display our feelings, they feed our feelings.

- *Cognitive behavior therapy* guides people to think, talk, and act in positive, depression-inconsistent ways, and to practice their new positive behavior as they approach everyday settings.

So, what positive activities might instructors attempt with students? Lyubomirsky and Layous offer *Observer* readers four simple and brief activities that have been shown to increase well-being. Ready-for-class instructions for each of these activities is available at www.psychologicalscience.org/teaching-well-being.

1. *Five acts of kindness*. “If you want to be happy, practice compassion,” said the Dalai Lama. Students receive instructions for performing five kind acts in a single day.
2. *Gratitude letter*. Invite students to recall someone from their past who “did something for you for which you are extremely grateful,” and to spend 10-minutes writing a letter to this person.
3. *Counting blessings*. Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough (2003) report that students who keep a gratitude journal, by recording happenings for which they feel thankful, experience increased joy, decreased stress, and greater optimism. Lyubomirsky and Layous ask students to reflect on the past week and write down up to five things for which they are thankful.
4. *Best possible self*. Lyubomirsky and Layous bid students to imagine that “everything has gone as well as it possibly could” in their future academic life, and to spend 10 minutes continuously writing about that ideal future. They also offer instructions for doing the same about one’s future social life, career, and/or health.

With promised confidentiality for their writing, students could be asked to report afterward on their reactions to the positive activity interventions. Does doing good foster feeling good? Do expressing gratitude and counting blessings increase one’s feeling fortunate? Does imagining one’s best possible self increase, at least temporarily, a more determined and optimistic outlook?

We can imagine additional positive activity interventions.

- *Practice daily micro gratitude*. Attend to people’s helpful or kind acts—perhaps someone who serves one’s food, drive one’s bus, or cleans one’s classroom—and, for one week, make a point of thanking those people.
- *Volunteer*. Help at the neighborhood soup kitchen. Become a big sister or brother. Befriend someone who is a homebound or a senior citizen.
- *Make comparisons that breed appreciation rather than envy*. Expose one self, imaginatively or in reality, to those who have less of whatever you desire, rather than those who have more.

If done as a lab project, students could respond, before and after the positive activity interventions, to scales assessing *gratitude* (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2001; questionnaire at tinyurl.com/gratitudeQ) or *well-being*, such as the 20-item Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Watson, Clark, & Tellegan, 1988; questionnaire at tinyurl.com/PosNegAffect).

References

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