

ABSTRACT

Due to the nature and demands of their work, healthcare professionals, including primary care physicians, are at risk of experiencing burnout. They might feel exhausted or lack enthusiasm and motivation toward their work and other aspects of life, despite experiencing no obvious difficulties or major problems. Positive psychology is the scientific study of positive emotions, positive traits and strengths, and the processes that promote well-being and optimal functioning (or what is termed as flourishing). This article introduces readers to positive psychology and discusses the concepts and techniques in the context of burnout in primary care physicians. Suggestions are provided on how to use strategies from positive psychology to achieve happiness and fulfilment in one's life.

Keywords:

Burnout, Happiness, Positive Psychology, Resilience, Well-being

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INTRODUCTION

As clinicians, we often assess well-being by looking at the presence (or absence) of problems, symptoms, or deficits; our work focuses largely on the diagnosis and treatment of such problems. So when someone says to us, "There is nothing wrong with my life. I have no problems, but I'm not happy," we scratch our heads, because there is no diagnosis or problem to treat. The same can apply to the clinician's own personal and professional life. Things might outwardly be going smoothly for the clinician but somehow there is a felt sense that something is missing.

THE MENTAL HEALTH CONTINUUM

There is a group of scholars who argue that the relief of suffering (or ill-being) does not necessarily lead to well-being, that the absence of sadness and anguish does not necessarily bring about joy and satisfaction. Rather, they view mental illness and mental health to be two separate, but related, dimensions.¹ On the mental health continuum, the presence of mental health is defined as flourishing (see Figure 1).²

Flourishing refers to a state of emotional, psychological, and social well-being, comprising characteristics of goodness,

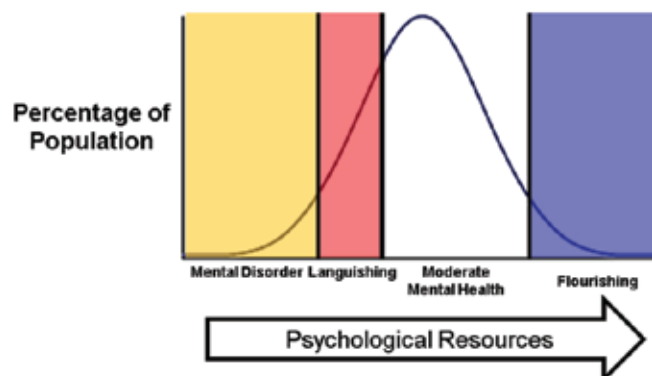


Figure 1: The mental health spectrum. Adapted from Huppert (2005).

generativity, growth, and resilience. In contrast, the absence of mental health is characterised as languishing. While some languishing individuals also meet criteria for depression, a portion of those in this group do not. Hence, there is an absence of mental illness, and also an absence of mental health; these individuals do not have "problems" per se, but they do not experience well-being either. Individuals who are not flourishing or languishing are characterised as having moderate mental health. A study conducted in the United States found that 17.2 percent of individuals were flourishing. Flourishing individuals tended to have better psychosocial functioning.² Positive psychology is concerned with moving people from mental illness and languishing, to flourishing. It looks beyond suffering and its direct alleviation, and studies processes that promote flourishing lives of well-being and optimal functioning.

POSITIVE EMOTIONS ARE IMPORTANT FOR WELL-BEING

A large portion of positive psychology examines the nature and ways to enhance positive emotions. Why focus on positive emotions? There is evidence to show that happier and more optimistic people live longer lives.^{3,4} Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden and Build Theory proposes five ways in which positive emotions are important.^{5,6}

1. Positive emotions **broaden thoughts, actions, and attention.**⁷ For example, in a study of diagnostic decision-making, physicians induced with positive affect were found to consider the correct diagnosis more quickly, showed less tendency to rely solely on one piece of information, and did not engage in hasty processing.⁸ This suggests that physicians who are in better moods may make better diagnostic decisions.

2. As positive emotions broaden our lens and perspective of the world, they have the potential to **undo lingering negative emotions** by loosening the grip of negative emotions.⁹ For example, experiencing a positive emotion would help one to

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recover faster from a frustrating or negative experience earlier in the day.

3. Positive emotions **build personal resources**. These include physical (e.g., muscle growth, cardiovascular health), social (e.g., friendships, family bonds), intellectual (through enhanced learning), and psychological resources (resilience).⁵

4. Positive emotions are thought to trigger upward spirals of well-being and **promote resilience** in the face of adversity.¹⁰ Research shows that people who experience more positive emotions are able to regulate their emotions more effectively and find meaning in their circumstances, enabling them to bounce back more quickly from difficulties and adverse experiences.¹¹

5. The theory suggests that through the above mechanisms and reciprocal relationships, the effects of positive emotions accumulate and compound over time to **seed and fuel human flourishing**.¹²

Hence, enhancing and then building up a store of positive emotions would serve not only as a resource to protect against physician burnout; it could empower the physician to develop a sense of well-being and growth in spite of adverse work conditions.

THREE PATHS TO WELL-BEING: THE FULL LIFE

Studies have shown that positive, resource-building emotions can be cultivated systematically.¹³ How, then, do we foster positive emotions in our pursuit of “happiness”? In his book, Martin Seligman¹⁴ introduces the three dimensions, or roads, to happiness: the Pleasant Life, the Good (Engaged) Life, and the Meaningful Life. A person who uses all three roads to happiness is said to lead “the full life”.¹¹ The Pleasant Life is achieved when people experience positive emotions about the past (e.g., satisfaction, contentment, pride), present (satisfaction derived from immediate pleasures), and future (hope, optimism, faith, trust, and confidence). Such emotions can be derived from exercises that focus on forgiveness, gratitude, and savouring everyday experiences.

The Good (Engaged) Life consists of using and developing your personal strengths or talents to live out the various areas of your life as closely to your personal values as possible. When our activities in these areas utilise our talents and align with our values, we enter a state of deep engagement with the activity we are undertaking, also known as flow. Flow experiences refer to states in which we are so fully absorbed in what we are doing that time seems to stop or pass quickly.¹⁵ In contrast, a disengaged life would entail, for example, a physician going through his clinical day distracted, cynical, and bored. Not surprisingly, these are also symptoms of burnout.¹⁶ Other activities that help us to achieve flow are those that present a challenge to us, and require a considerable level of skill without over-stretching us. They should also be intrinsically rewarding (things we enjoy), require concentration, and have clear goals with immediate feedback.

The Meaningful Life involves using and extending your strengths to connect with and be of service to something larger

than you.¹⁴ Examples include service to the community, service to a cause, or involvement in a religious institution. It essentially involves looking beyond oneself. For medical practitioners, for instance, this could involve joining initiatives such as the Medecins Sans Frontieres.

The Full Life thus consists of pleasure, engagement, and meaning. Taking small but concrete steps to live these three kinds of lives would enable the physician to become more resilient to burnout, and in the longer term, develop a sense of growth despite adversity. In contrast, the empty life occurs when one or more of these elements are lacking. This way, we can see why and how someone may not have “problems”, but is still not “happy”.

METHODS FOR CULTIVATING YOUR WELL-BEING

Here are some methods that could help you begin to cultivate well-being. Choose the ones that feel the most suitable for you.

A. How To Build Your Pleasant Life

Exercise 1: Practicing gratitude for overlooked things^{17,18}

1. At the end of the day, before going to bed....
2. Mentally list **3 things** that happened today that you are grateful for — “I am thankful that _____”. Recall the details of these 3 things, and as you take your time to do so, notice how you feel emotionally.
 - They can be very small things or events (e.g., you found a good parking lot, someone smiled at you, you had some free time to yourself, you noticed a pretty flower by the road); or
 - They can also be potentially “bad” or “negative” events that did not happen (e.g., you got into the office just in time before a big downpour, you very nearly slipped and fell but caught your balance, your anticipated conflict with a colleague turned out better than expected).
3. Do this exercise every night and notice what happens over time to your mood. Remember, consistent gratitude is the key.

Too often, many people overlook the small positive events that are happening around them. Instead, they focus on the large (and relatively infrequent) negative experiences. When people start to notice the small positive events, they might come to notice more of these and their mood might grow more positive.

Exercise 2: What went right?¹⁹

1. Look back at your day so far.
2. Recall the big and small things that went well for you.
3. Ask yourself, “What went right in these situations? **How did I make it happen?**”
4. **Optional extra:** Look at the setbacks and ask yourself, “What could have gone worse? **How did I manage to prevent it from becoming worse?**”

This is a variation of Exercise 1. Doing this exercise every day

will build up your ability to look for the real positives that are happening around you. It also challenges you to look at the small actions you have taken to ensure that these positives happen. Consequently, recalling the day in this way will build up your positive emotions, and give you a sense of empowerment.

Exercise 3: Make time to savour life²⁰

1. Choose a small activity that you enjoy or find pleasant to do (e.g., drinking your morning coffee, reading the newspapers).
2. Set aside small amounts of time (e.g., 5 minutes) every day. It helps to schedule these times into your daily timetable.
3. Devote this time to enjoying this activity completely and nothing else. See if you can mindfully savour this activity, noticing all the details involved in this activity.
 - What are the motions or sensations of going through this activity?
 - Which of your 5 senses are involved in doing this activity?
 - How does it feel like, as you take your time to engage in this activity?

An example: Suppose a physician has a passion for gardening. He keeps a small terrarium in his consultation room. During his lunch break, he deliberately sets aside 5 minutes to tend to his terrarium. He takes his phone off the hook or turns it to silent mode. He locks his consult room door to ensure no interruption. Now, he takes time to tidy up his terrarium, sprinkling water (and noticing the sensation and sight of water), taking in the smell of fresh greens and earth coming from his terrarium. Once he has tidied it to his satisfaction, he takes a few more minutes to appreciate the overall sight it makes.

B. How To Build Your Good Life

Exercise 4: Reflect on your signature strengths²¹

- Review the list: Here is a list of common strengths:
 - o Creativity, Curiosity, Love of learning, Open-mindedness, Perspective;
 - o Authenticity, Bravery, Persistence, Zest;
 - o Kindness, Love, Social intelligence;
 - o Fairness, Leadership, Teamwork;
 - o Forgiveness/Mercy, Modesty/Humility, Prudence, Self-regulation; and
 - o Appreciation of beauty and excellence, Gratitude, Hope, Humor, Spirituality.
- Top 5: Based on this list (and however you personally interpret them), list your top 5 strengths. Reflect upon how your close friends and significant others describe you — this might give you a clue about what your strengths are. What do you like about yourself? The answer to this question might also provide some clues.
- How you use your strengths: For your top 5 strengths, write down an example of how you are currently using each one. (e.g., Gratitude — I thank everyone sincerely even if they criticise me as this is useful feedback)

- Different application: Now choose one of these top 5 strengths, brainstorm ways you can apply this strength differently over the course of the next week. Try it out and note the effects this has on you. Repeat this for your other strengths.

The purpose of this exercise is to help you identify strengths you might otherwise have taken for granted, and then to more actively apply them in your life in different ways. Active application of your strengths can help you lead a more engaged life.

Exercise 5: Activities that engage you^{22,23}

1. Are there activities that you do at work or at home, that are challenging and absorbing? To the extent that you “lose yourself” or lose track of time? Examples include: cooking a new dish, playing games, or picking up a new skill. Do more of these activities.

2. You can also achieve flow at work and at home by reflecting on your values and taking small actions in accordance with these values:

- You can refer to the list of value words at: http://www.thehappinesstrap.com/upimages/pdf_files/020413/forty_common_values_exercise.pdf.
- What are the most important things for you? Why are they important to you?
- What are you passionate about? What about this activity makes you so passionate?
- If you had no limitations, how would you want to live your life? What values does this Best Life reflect?
- Think back to a time when you were under great stress and adversity — How did you act at that time as you weathered this adversity? What values do your actions reflect?

3. Optional Extra: As a medical practitioner, what are your personal values? How does your practice reflect these values?

Values act as internal compasses for us, especially under duress and confusion. They remind us what to do and are a means by which we can be mindful of our actions. When we live according to what is important to us, we would be more easily motivated to take action and we would also feel positively about ourselves.

C. How To Build Your Meaningful Life

Exercise 6: Giving your time to others²³

- Choose a person you will be talking to or doing some activity with.
- Next time you are talking to this person, turn off your electronic devices and really listen to them. Show interest in what they are saying; respond and ask them questions. Fully devote this time to this other person.
- Next time you are doing something with this person (e.g., playing a game, watching a show, cooking, eating), devote

your attention fully to this activity and enjoy it with this person.

Exercise 7: Generosity and acts of kindness²³

- In your daily life, consider what small things you can give to people you encounter. Give this genuinely from your heart, without expecting any repayments or benefits to yourself.
- It could be giving a coin to the needy, volunteer work or community service, a cup of coffee for your colleague, helping someone up the bus, smiling at and greeting the cashier, holding the door for someone and so forth. It can even be a secret act of kindness, where no one observes you doing something good for someone else.
- You may also use your signature strengths to perform acts of kindness. For example, if you are good at baking, you could bake some cookies for your colleagues. Or if you are patient and good at mathematics, you might tutor your nephew who has an upcoming test.

These exercises are simple to do but their effects are profound. Research has found that people who perform acts of kindness and generosity regularly tend to have better emotional health.²⁴

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LEARNING POINTS

- **Positive psychology is the study of positive emotions and the processes that promote well-being and optimal functioning.**
- **The absence of mental illness does not necessarily indicate the presence of mental health and well-being.**
- **Individuals can be viewed on a mental health continuum, from languishing, to moderate mental health, to flourishing.**
- **Positive emotions broaden our thoughts and actions, build our resources, create upward spirals that promote resilience, and seed human flourishing.**
- **Happiness is achieved through the Full Life, which consists of the Pleasant Life (of positive emotions), the Good (Engaged) Life, and the Meaningful Life.**
- **Strategies to cultivate well-being include: Gratitude exercises, savouring experiences, reflecting on and using one's strengths, engaging in activities and actions in accordance with one's values, and making gifts of time and kindness to others.**