

# TEAM WELLNESS SERIES

## PART 5 OF 5 - POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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As you will see in this short overview, positive psychology is NOT walking around forcing a smile on your face all the time or sitting around waiting for positive things to happen to you just because you wish them to happen. These are misconceptions that over-simplify the true nature of positive psychology. **Positive psychology** is a major approach over the past 20 years that takes a much broader perspective that can help us improve our resilience. It is aimed at understanding how we can improve *happiness, optimism, meaning, contentment, a sense of control, and well-being in our lives.*

An overall sense of **well-being**, and not just happiness alone, is the general goal in positive psychology. Martin Seligman, Ph. D. (who is credited with being the founder of positive psychology) describes “well-being” as a combination of feeling good with *positive emotions* as well as having *meaning, good relationships, and accomplishments in life.* We can see that these recommendations would clearly enhance our overall *resilience* to stress. Positive emotions (or happiness) and healthy relationships are extremely important in well-being. At the same time these are just as essential in how we buffer ourselves with resilience from the impact of stress. Similarly, having meaning and a sense of accomplishment or achievement will have a tremendous impact on self-esteem and confidence, which are both critical in resilience. Thus, *effective stress management enhances our well-being, and well-being in turn helps improve the resilience* needed to protect us from the negative effects of stress. These two approaches go hand in hand.

An overall summary of the key recommendations of positive psychology to build resilience are:

**FIRST – BUILD IN POSITIVE EMOTIONS** which means have a variety of healthy ways to have fun.

**SECOND – MAINTAIN POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS** with others which is crucial to well-being.

**THIRD – BUILD SUCCESS WITH ACCOMPLISHMENTS** is areas that are important to you – for example in your career, your family, or in your community.

**FOURTH – BE PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER THAN YOURSELF** which means that you help other people or organizations. This can be a connection to a volunteer group, a church/spiritual organization, a community or company project. This means doing something for others, not just for yourself.

There are some specific steps within positive psychology that can enhance your well-being. Here we can only recommend a few exercises that have a positive effect on well-being and happiness which will improve resilience.

### LEARN TO EXPRESS GRATITUDE

The practice of expressing gratitude or being thankful is very important in the field of positive psychology. Look back at your life so far. Is there anyone to whom you can express your true sense of gratitude? Have you expressed your thankfulness in any way? If so, try to remember how it felt when you did this.

The research over the past few years on the importance of expressing gratitude has consistently shown positive emotional effects. One of the most powerful exercises is to write a “gratitude letter” to someone who has had a positive impact on you. This exercise typically demonstrates how important the *practice of showing gratitude* is in improving your overall emotional state. It is recommended that you look for opportunities to share gratitude in less formal ways on a regular basis with friends, co-workers, and family. Grateful people typically see life as being more satisfactory and focus on what they have rather than what is missing in their lives.

## COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

Because we often tend to overlook many of the positive things (blessings) we have going for us, it is helpful to spend some time looking at what we are thankful for in our personal lives. You can do this in a number of ways. You can begin to do your own inventory of positive things in your life whether these are relationships of all sorts, personal characteristics, skills and abilities, accomplishments, the environment you live in, your job, even material possessions, etc. Keep a list of these blessings on paper since you are likely to forget many items that could be listed at any given moment. By keeping an ongoing written list, you will see the list grow over time. Periodically review your list as a reminder of the positive people, places, and things in your life. This helps us “see the glass more full than empty”.

## FURTHER STEPS

In addition to these two exercises there are many other things you can do in order to begin to benefit from the philosophy in positive psychology. Here is a brief list:

1. Do *random acts of kindness* when you see the opportunities to help others.
2. Volunteer to work with other crew on any ship project.
3. Become a mentor as a “big brother” or “big sister” for other crew on the ship or in your community when you are back home.
4. Join a meaningful charity, school, organization, or group.
5. In addition to continuing all the activities that regularly bring you emotional happiness, try to develop a menu of additional experiences that bring you joy. For example, find entertaining TV shows or movies to enjoy with friends, listen to your favorite music, or collect a set of humorous YouTube clips on your computer that you can use whenever you want to feel better.
6. Develop a new skill or rekindle an old interest that you think you could become passionate about, especially those activities that involve other people. Learn a new enjoyable game (chess, backgammon, cards, etc.), a skill (cooking, photography, dancing, etc.) or a hobby.
7. Actively look for something you can do that a family member, close friend, or fellow crew member would not expect, but would make them happy or grateful toward you.
8. Take a few minutes before you go to sleep at night to think of three positive things you are thankful for during the day. Try this for a week or more to see if you become more aware of your blessings.

Although you do not have to do all of these things to be happy and resilient to stress, some combination of these efforts is likely to have a significant positive impact on your mood, and general life satisfaction.