Laura L.C. Johnson, MA, MBA, LMFT, LPCC is a Cognitive Behavior Therapist and the founder and executive director of the Cognitive Behavior Therapy Center of Silicon Valley and Sacramento Valley. She integrates positive psychology with cognitive behavior therapy and schema therapy, which have been shown to be effective for a wide variety of problems in hundreds of studies. Her clients learn skills to build positive emotions, optimism, and resilience while decreasing unhelpful thinking, behaviors, and emotions. Full bio. Laura’s articles are here.

**POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY FOR DEPRESSION (BOOK REVIEW)**
written by Laura L.C. Johnson
March 26, 2012

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*Positive Psychology for Depression* is a book specifically designed to help people with a predisposition toward depression foster and maintain more positive moods. The book presents a concise overview of concepts in the field of positive psychology such as positive emotions, optimism, resilience, meditation, strengths, positive relationships, goal-setting, and the mind-body connection.

The author, Miriam Akhtar, has suffered from depression herself. She includes many personal anecdotes that show how positive psychology has helped her to combat her depression and maintain a more cheerful mood over time. From Rumination to Savoring

Rumination is a style of thinking that involves mentally reviewing
things that have gone wrong, as well as their causes and consequences. It is also a significant risk factor for depression. Rumination is cyclical and self-reflexive in nature, and frequently operates like a record skipping over the same thoughts again and again.

As Akhtar notes, “I had […] a curious habit of interrupting positive experiences by asking myself ‘But am I happy?’ And in an instant the happiness would evaporate.” She notes that when she took time to explore what to do with her life, she commonly experienced a downward spiral because she kept dwelling on bad feelings. As a psychotherapist, I have noticed that emotional problems have a tendency to develop and to stick when people ponder questions like, “Why aren’t I happier?” “Why am I feeling anxious?” or “Why can’t I sleep?” It can be more helpful to accept the moment as it is and to focus on noticing and savoring what’s going well.

**Putting the “Positive” Back Into Psychotherapy**

I enjoyed reading *Positive Psychology for Depression* because the author’s experience demonstrates a path for healing that is hopeful and inspiring. As I have written in the past, in my work with therapy clients, I am trying to put the “positive” back into psychotherapy.

Akhtar reports that “strategies that build the positive have been shown to shrink the negative,” and “40 percent of happiness is under your control and can be increased by the activities you engage in and your outlook on life.” Below are some well illustrated ideas from her book that may be especially helpful for maintaining a positive mood and reducing the risk of depression.

1. **Build and Savor Positive Emotions.**
   1. Ask yourself “What’s going right in my life right now?”
   2. Identify what you enjoy doing, and do more of it.
   3. Engage with a positive experience in the moment, without analyzing it.
   4. Learn to savor your positive experiences. Slow down and stretch out the experience. Engage your full attention. Use all your senses. Reflect on the source of the enjoyment.
   5. Avoid the tendency to compare yourself to others. Stop asking yourself questions like, “Am I as successful?” “Am I as happy?” “As attractive?” “As rich?” “As slim?” Instead, notice and appreciate what you’ve got and the person that you are.

2. **Learn to Think Like an Optimist.**
   1. When things go wrong, try to think of all possible causes, and don’t automatically blame yourself. Remind yourself that this is likely to be temporary even though, at the moment, it may feel like it will last forever. Look at your past experience for evidence that things can improve. Focus on other areas of your life that are currently working well.
   2. When good things happen, recognize your responsibility and give yourself credit for the occurrence. You can also expect more good things to happen, and relate this realization to other areas of your life.

3. **Build Positive Relationships.**
   1. Increase the positivity ratio in your relationships to 5:1 – it takes five positive experiences to make up for every negative event in a relationship.
   2. Practice active constructive responding. In other words, respond to someone’s good news with enthusiasm and energy rather than in a passive or destructive manner. This will help them to think of more positives and to savor the good news even more.
   3. Don’t get drawn into other people’s misery. Try to be compassionate without taking part.
   4. Forgive others and let go of ruminating on past hurts. This is good for your health. Forgiveness does not mean acceptance. You can forgive someone and still decide you don’t want them to be part of your life.

1. **Identify and Focus on Positive Goals.**
   1. Focus on developing your strengths rather than on fixing your weaknesses. This is where you’ll get the maximum return on your investment.
   2. Aim low by taking many small steps rather than one big step. Small steps are more likely to get you going in the right direction.
More Research on Positive Psychotherapies is Needed

In the mental health field, cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) is the gold standard for treating depression and anxiety. In hundreds of research studies, CBT has been shown to be helpful for a wide variety of emotional problems and life issues.

Positive psychology evolved out of the CBT tradition and has focused primarily on “healthy” i.e. non-clinical populations, generally in a coaching or training setting. Given the many commonalities between CBT and positive psychology, I think therapists who adopt a positive, strengths-based approach can integrate positive psychology concepts and techniques into evidence-based cognitive-behavioral treatments. Examples of both practice and research into putting positive psychology and therapy together include

- Christine Padesky, a prominent CBT therapist, co-authored a book on strength-based case conceptualization for building client resilience. She travels around the world training therapists on this approach.
- Quality of Life Therapy by Michael Frisch combines CBT with positive psychology and has some research behind it, but this approach has not been widely disseminated.
- In 2006, Seligman, Rashid and Parks published promising results for a positive psychotherapy approach for depression based on two studies. I’ve heard that Oxford has plans to publish a step-by-step treatment manual.
- Nancy Sin and Sonja Lyubomirsky published a meta-analysis which included 25 studies on a variety of positive psychology interventions (PPIs) for depression and concluded that PPIs do help ameliorate depressive symptoms.

Going forward, I hope that positive psychology researchers and clinicians will focus greater resources on developing comprehensive, evidence-based positive psychotherapies for depression and anxiety as well as training therapists on these approaches.

Who This Book Can Help

Positive psychology may be able to protect you against depression by building your resilience and well-being. In a way, positive psychology is like a vaccine – it may not completely prevent or cure depression in everyone but it certainly can help many long-time sufferers of depression from escalating a downward spiral as well as help people bounce back more quickly from adversity. I recommend this book to anyone who wants an overview of positive psychology concepts and suggestions for how to apply the ideas to develop more positive emotions, thinking, and acting in order to reduce the risk of depression.

References


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Just curious – is there any research on someone’s ability to overcome depression on their own vs. with a trusted partner? (friend, spouse, therapist, coach, etc). I love the notion of using PP to help foster more resilience, optimism, positive moods, etc. It seems to me, out of my very limited experience coaching people with depression (and my clients were “also” seeing a therapist at the same time), that it would work better with some sort of interpersonal support. My clients weren’t always able to muster up the energy they needed to do what they knew they should do on their own.
(And that supportive interpersonal approach could also be quite PP in its own way...)
Thanks for the book review!
List of positive psychology courses:
All Positive Psychology Courses HERE
(Over 50 courses listed so far in America and the world!)
If you are teaching or know someone who is teaching a course, please enter the positive psychology course information here for everyone to see! This is a public list, so please be aware of that when entering your email address:

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**HARRY @ GOALSONTRACK**
March 26, 2012 - 6:01 pm

Great advice on taking small steps. Small step is great for building momentum. And once we get momentum, it’s usually much easier to keep doing whatever is needed to reach the goal.

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**NICHOLAS RITCHEY**
April 1, 2012 - 5:53 am

Harry, if you like small steps and haven’t yet read up on Kaizen, definitely check out:
One Small Step Can Change Your Life: The Kaizen Way by Robert Maurer on Amazon
It’s been pivotal in improving my productivity and results over the last 2 years.
Positive psychology techniques attempt to shift away from traditional psychotherapy’s focus on negative emotions, and encourage patients to emphasize their… As its name implies, well-being therapy tries to promote recovery from depression and other affective disorders by having a patient focus on and promote the positive, as well as alleviating negative aspects of life. Developed by Giovanni Fava at the University of Bologna in Italy, well-being therapy is based in large part on the work of psychologist Carol Ryff and her multidimensional model of subjective well-being. The Amazon Book Review Book recommendations, author interviews, editors’ picks, and more. Read it now. click to open popover. Lots of wonderful insights and ideas on battling and overcoming depression but often leading to mutually contradictory situations. I am digging deeper to try and incorporate as many of the ideas that illustrate (very well) the failings of most contemporary approaches to treating depression. This very practical book presents many techniques, based on positive psychology, which helps to improve our wellbeing and subsequently may prevent depressive episodes in the future. Too frequently the treatment of depression focuses only on reaching the ‘neutral’ state of normalcy. Positive psychology complements traditional psychological approaches to mental health. The stance of positive psychology is to study ‘what makes life worth living.’ Practitioners of positive psychology focus on interventions that develop a sense of optimism, and that foster positive attitudes (toward oneself, one’s subjective experiences, and life events). Positive psychology in its current implementation was given a boost by Martin Seligman’s presidential address given to the American Psychological Association in 1999. He proposed that although contemporary psychology successfully focused on Another way positive psychology can help those who are suffering from depression, recession-related or not, is expressed in a Psychology Today article. Martin Seligman (the father of positive psychology) described the importance of ‘learned optimism’ in preventing depression. This means ‘training your brain’ to focus on the good and joyful aspects of your life. Here are some of Seligman’s suggestions. Positive Psychology for Overcoming Depression: Self-Help Strategies for Happiness, Inner-Strength and Well-Being. London: Watkins Publishing. Anderson, L., Lewis, G., Araya, R., Elgie, R., Harrison, G., Proudfoot, J. et al. (2005). Self-help books for depression: how can practitioners and patients make the right choice? British Journal of General Practice, 55, 387–392. Barth, J., Munder, T., Gerger, H., Nüesch, E., Trelle, S., Znoj, H. et al. Patient preferences for treatment of major depressive disorder and the impact on health outcomes: a systematic review. Primary Care Companion, 15, PCC-11r01161. doi: 10.4088/PCC.11r01161. Gilbert, P. (2009).