



THE
LAY COUNSELOR
ACADEMY

Helping with Happiness Practices

Brief Splash: The Greater Good Science Center's [Happiness Practices Resource Center](#) (research on happiness, podcast on happiness practices, free "Science of Happiness" course, articles, and more)

Deeper Dive: Read Barbara L. Fredrickson's [Positivity: Groundbreaking Research Reveals How to Embrace the Hidden Strength of Positive Emotions, Overcome Negativity, and Thrive](#)

In some ways, the idea of counselors helping clients to be happier is a radical one. There is a long history in mental health of focusing almost solely on mitigating symptoms. The reasons for this are varied and complex: the centralizing task of diagnosing (and relatedly, payment for services being tied to diagnosis), schooling and training that tends to be laser focused on treatment of symptoms, and the overuse of condition-specific screening and tracking tools which measure only symptoms and impairment, are a few

The [Positive Psychology](#) movement was, in part, a response to this. Martin Seligman is considered the father of this movement, which is defined as:

"...the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The field is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play." Happiness practices, and the research that supports them, have roots in this movement. Focusing on strengths, another pillar of Positive Psychology is one of the main strategies in our "home stance" (affirming strengths).

Focusing on happiness with clients seems obvious, or perhaps easy. Instead, it can be surprisingly complex. This is in part because the context of counseling is problem-focused: problems are often why people seek help. What feels most natural, both to clients and counselors, is to focus on "fixing" or resolving the problem(s) causing the distress or unhappiness. Alternatively, clients may want to focus on something they want to change about themselves, and that essentially becomes the problem to solve. What the positive psychology field and related happiness practices research demonstrates, is that just mitigating a problem, lessening symptoms, or focusing on improving deficits will not necessarily result in a better quality of life or more happiness. Focusing instead (or additionally) on growing strengths and enhancing happiness practices seems to have a bigger impact on quality-of-life improvements, even if the original "problem" or "deficit" is unchanged.



All of us have a different, and sometimes fraught, relationship with happiness. Some of our clients (and us), might feel they've never been happy—they might not be sure what it is or know how to recognize it. Sometimes people who had very difficult childhoods struggle to be happy in adulthood. Many people feel happiness is not in their control, that it depends on what happens outside of themselves (for example: "I can't be happy unless I have more money/look different/my boss treats me better/move to a new place...").

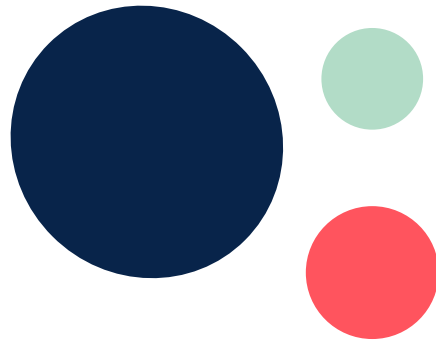


Eliciting

A first step in talking about happiness practices with clients, is to understand their own history with happiness. For example:

Client:

"I honestly feel like I've always been anxious; I was always a nervous kid, and now it seems like I'm just on edge all the time, I never can relax."



Counselor, after sufficient home-stance:

"It sounds like you've always been anxious, and more recently it feels like you are never able to relax (empathic reflection); that sounds really tough and super tiring (acknowledging feelings); tell me more about that (open-ended question)..."

then,

"I wonder if you can tell me about your relationship to happiness...?"

Or

"Can you tell me as much as possible about the last time you felt happy?"

Or

"Can you tell me more about your level of happiness, in general, as a child/growing up?"

Or

"Tell me a bit about your parents/caregivers' levels of happiness when you were growing up..." (follow up) "how did this affect you?"



We can find out more (and in doing so, slightly pivot focus to happiness) about what the conditions are, for their happiness now:

"Tell me what makes you most happy..."

Or

"You sound really happy when you talk about X; can you tell me more about this?"

Or

"When/where/with who are you most happy?"

Or

"What comes between you and happiness?"

Or

"What would a perfect day be for you?...tell me all the details, where you are, what you are doing, who you are with..."

Providing Information

We can provide some normalizing education about happiness. This often moves clients into a "perspective taking" stance, where they can look at their own happiness with a bit of distance and begin (or be reminded) that we can influence our own happiness. Examples of normalizing education we might provide, selectively, after making a judgment it might be useful, and using Ask, Ask, Tell, Ask (AATA):

- Being happy isn't easy for many of us.
- Being happy takes a lot of practice and a lot of work for many of us.
- Our culture has aligned happiness with capitalism (type of house, car, food, and things we own). Most of us have been conditioned by this, to some extent.
- Our culture has aligned youth and traditional white culture beauty and body size with happiness. Most of us have been conditioned by this too.



- How we appraise and respond to what happens in our lives, often has as big an impact on our happiness as the thing or event itself.
- Most of us have a “happiness-set-point” we tend toward. Events outside of us can often bring us up or down for short periods, after which we typically move back toward our set-point.
- Our set-point is influenced by many things, including: the temperament we were born with, our early childhood experiences, our parents/caregivers happiness levels, our family and cultural groups’ framing and relationship to happiness, our experiences in adulthood, and our own intentional work around our set-point.
- We can practice being happy through self-guiding our thoughts—identifying which thoughts bring happiness, which ones lower happiness, and work toward managing our minds in this way
- We can purposefully do things (self-care, enjoyable or pleasurable activities), be in places, and be around people that reliably bring happiness
- There are happiness practices that have been well-researched and show a positive influence on happiness, for most people.
- The following practices all have a robust evidence base:
 - **Gratitude Practices**: Cultivating a stance of consistent gratefulness for what we have is a powerhouse happiness practice. There are many well-researched ways to practice gratitude: keeping a gratitude journal, sharing our gratitude for others with them (in person or by letter), sharing what we are grateful for daily with others (at the dinner table, with friends every morning), and consistently directing and guiding our thinking toward what we are grateful for.
 - **Mindfulness Practices** and **Meditation Practices**: Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and the environment, through a gentle, kind lens. It originally comes from Buddhist meditation, however a secular practice of mindfulness has entered the American mainstream in recent years. Thousands of studies have documented the physical and mental health benefits (including happiness) of mindfulness practices.



- **Awe Practices:** Awe is the feeling we get in the presence of something vast that pushes against our human understanding. For example, looking up at millions of stars in the night sky, or being amazed at the birth of a child, or the love between animals of different species. We might describe it also as wonder, amazement, surprise, or transcendence. Awe is perspective-giving, as we experience the vastness and depth of the world, and our own small place in it. Awe will often wipe away our worries, as they seem miniscule in comparison. Awe is related to a cascade of positive emotions, including happiness, joy, and gratitude. Experiencing awe has been shown to have a positive impact on mood that day, and often for days after.
- **Collective Elevation:** Collective elevation is the feeling of euphoria, or intense happiness and connection we feel, when we are in a group of people experiencing the same thing. Examples of this are the connection and elevated feelings we have at sporting events, when incredible plays happen; the feelings we have when we are at live concerts of music we love; the experience we have at parties, singing together, dancing together, or other synchronized movements with large groups of people. Often when we are feeling collective elevation, we smile, high five, make eye contact, or laugh with people we don't know, just because they are next to us and we are both feeling the same thing. Collective elevation "boosts" can last for hours, or even days after the event is over.
- **Positivity Resonance:** Positivity resonance is a shared, positive emotion with another person. This can be a cashier at our grocery store when we are checking out, a repair person in our home, or our family members or partner. When we have a positive connection, no matter how short, our brains tend to "sync up" with each other, emotionally and physically. Most of us know the feeling of having a positive conversation with another person, and the feeling of intimacy it can create. We know when this happens, our brains are actually firing in the same patterns, in the same parts of the brain, almost simultaneously. This kind of mirroring is likely what creates the shared emotion that can make us feel alive and invigorated.

Important Note: While the above practices have substantial research underpinning them, a client's own happiness practices should take precedence. For example, if a client tells us they are happiest when they are outdoors with their dogs, our energy in session will be better spent working with the client to ensure every day includes these practices, than trying to move the client toward a gratitude journal. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive, and there is no such thing as too many happiness practices!



Helping Clients Take Action:

Once we have a sense of what (however small, or long ago) moves clients toward happiness, we can:

- In the same way we do with CBT, work with them to identify and decrease happiness-lowering thoughts, and increase happiness-enhancing thoughts

"I wonder if you can identify your 'top 5' thoughts that decrease your happiness and the 'top 5' that increase it"...."how do you usually notice when you are thinking happiness-lowering thoughts?"...."what would you like to be thinking, instead of that thought?"

NOTE: "shoulding" thoughts around happiness tends to decrease happiness as well. For example: *"I should be happy/happier."*

- Use Motivational Interviewing or other behavior change strategies to help clients increase the time and frequency in which they engage in activities that bring happiness or lead to happiness.

"It sounds like you are so happy when you spend time with your granddaughter/your dogs/your garden/doing art/walking outside. What have you already tried, in terms of doing this more often?" or "tell me how much/how often you'd like to be doing this..."

"It sounds like you have really positive, happy, high energy experiences when you get to hear live music/go to family parties....and it sounds like with the depression and low energy, it is really hard to feel motivated to do this. That is the hard thing about depression! It makes us not want to do the things that have made us happy in the past! Tell me your thoughts about this dilemma..."

I can hear how much you love being alone at night, looking at the stars. It sounds like your happy place! Tell me more about this..."



Cautions and Considerations

An important consideration in focusing on happiness practices with clients is that if we turn to happiness practices too quickly after a client has shared difficulties, it can feel to them as if we cannot hear or tolerate their difficult emotions. This can cause clients to “double-down” on the difficulty, in a (usually subconscious) plea for us to really hear them. Likewise, if we counter a client’s negative thinking or their sharing of difficulties with our own positive spin, it can feel like toxic positivity. For example:

Client:

“I just wish my mom could stop judging me, stop criticizing me all the time.”

Counselor

“I wonder if you could focus on what you are grateful for, about your mom.”

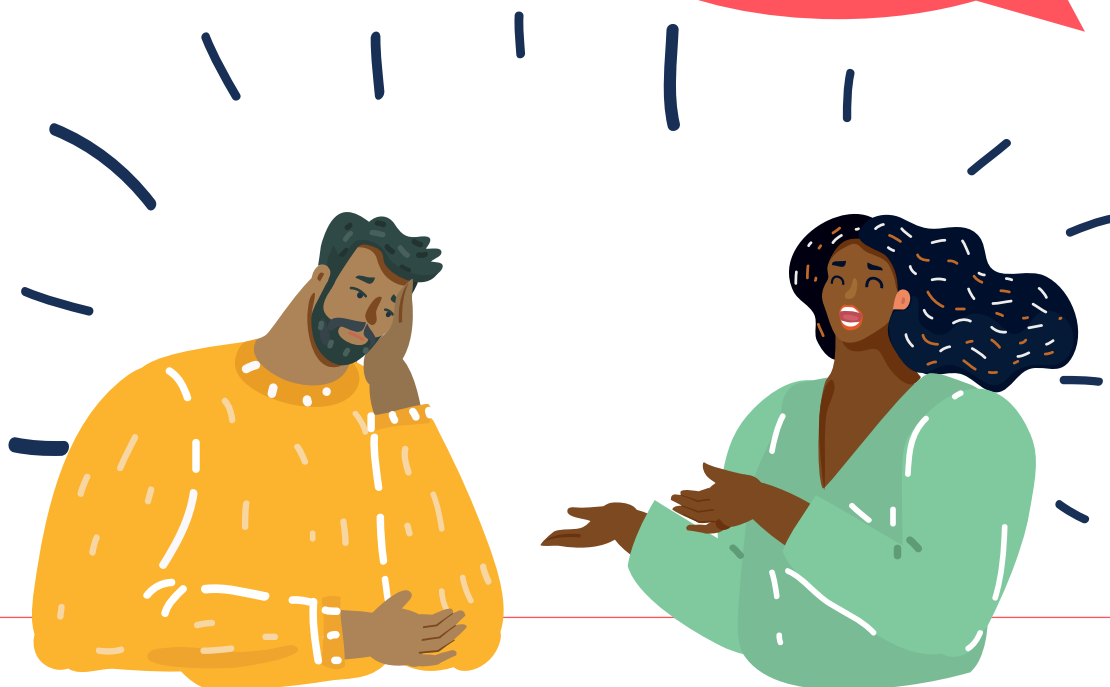
Or

Client:

“Honestly, nothing seems worthwhile anymore—I’m just trying to get through each day”

Counselor

“Maybe focusing on the positive would help you”



A secondary caution is around racism. Martin Seligman is a white man. For many decades, the psychology field has been dominated by white men, including those who conducted much of the early research discussed here. While the field is incredibly broad and varied at this time, happiness research and related research on positive emotions still often frames this as something that we have control over—essentially, if we can get our thinking “right” we can be happy. This ignores the profound impact poverty, racism, and other related social determinants of health have on individuals and communities. There is likely no amount of happiness practices that can mitigate not having enough food, being unhoused, or experiencing the chronic, toxic stress of racism. At worst, focusing on individual thinking as the main issue can feed into blaming oppressed and marginalized communities for being oppressed and marginalized, and ignoring the impact of white supremacy and toxic capitalism.

