POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY'S FASCINATING FACTS

Shocking Research Results!
About this eBook

“What is the meaning of life? That was all – a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark”

I hope that the insights in this eBook can serve as the unexpectedly stricken matches that Virginia Woolf spoke about in her 1927 book 'To the lighthouse'.

May they bring you health, positivity and happiness...
May they bring you rest, perspective and kindness...
May they provide support during tough times...
May they simply make you smile..

A special thanks goes out to all of the academics and professionals who have contributed to this eBook. All of the credits and references can be found at the end of this eBook.

Please feel free to print and share this document with others.

All the best!

Seph Fontane Pennock
Fascinating Fact #1: Acceptance
Countering cravings – all in your head?

With more people becoming overweight and obese, many are prone to eating unhealthily. Food cravings, which are an intense urge to eat a particular food, have been linked to overweight and obesity. There are many options to help people eat healthier, like point systems and calorie-controlled eating. But, as cravings start in the mind, can the mind be used to stop them?

People often try to tame food cravings through suppression, where one recognises that they are thinking a thought too much and try to stop it. However, the unwanted thought is kept and this strengthens cravings rather than weakening them.

Researchers from Maastricht University taught a group of overweight and obese adults to accept their food cravings. After seven weeks, this group reported lower food cravings, reduced loss of control when near food cues and reduced reinforcing value of food than the group that did not receive this training. It is speculated that recognising and allowing, rather than forbidding, one’s thoughts to be present reduces their power.

"As the dose decreases, the effect becomes more potent, more profound. The closer things get to nonexistence, the more exquisite and evocative they become."

Fascinating Fact #2: Addiction
Positive psychology: Turning teen lives around!

It has been well researched that teenagers who abuse alcohol suffer detrimental health problems later in life. Because of this positive psychology has made it its mission to improve teenage well-being. So, how can positive psychology help teenagers who abuse alcohol?

Researchers conducted an experiment where 10 teenagers participated in eight workshops based on the positive psychology models of happiness, strengths, optimism and gratitude. Another group of 10 teenagers did not attend any positive psychology workshops.

It was discovered that the group who did attend the workshops had increased levels of happiness, optimism and positive emotions and much lower levels of alcohol dependence. There were also developments of future goals and large amounts of change which were causing transformation. Positive psychology offers effective techniques which can be used to turn around the lives of teenagers who are suffering from alcoholism.
Fascinating Fact #3: Creativity
Positivity Breeds Creativity!

Ever wondered how a woman like Helen Keller, who was both deaf and blind remained positive throughout her life? Her optimism brought out the creativity within her and she went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree and publish 12 books within her lifetime. Positive affect consists of pleasant emotions, including excitement, joy, happiness, and optimism to name a few.

A positive mood indicates that all is well with the individual which invokes a more carefree and relaxed approach to tasks, allowing the creativity to flow (Filipowicz, 2010). Positive affect activates material that is internally interesting within the memory, and this material is often more widely diverse than other material. The activated cognitive mind increases the number of ideas which can be related to each other, which can increase the individual’s creativity. The way that positivity effects and relaxes the cognitive mind can promote creativity within the individual, and can benefit you in the end as in the case of Helen Keller.
Fascinating Fact #4: Depression
Positive psychology helps alleviate symptoms of depression!

Positive psychology, the fostering of positive emotions, positive behaviours and positive thinking; can it improve wellbeing and depressive tendencies? An analysis of 51 positive psychology interventions and 4,266 individuals were participated in a study to address this question; can positive psychology really cause such a significant change?

The studies reveal that positive psychology really does increase wellbeing and soothe depression. Furthermore, the status of depression, the age of the participants and the intervention all had an impact on the effectiveness of the interventions. Because of this, clinicians are strongly encouraged to begin incorporating positive psychology techniques into their work. Especially when treating elderly clients and people who are self-determined or depressed.

Interestingly, studies have also shown that clinicians would see great improvements in clients if durations of the therapy session went for a longer period of time.
Fascinating Fact #5: Exercise

Exercise promotes an optimistic you!

Recent studies looking at physical activity have found that highly active individuals are significantly more optimistic than inactive/low active individuals. People who engage in physical activity have been found to have higher self efficacy, lower anxiety, positive moods and greater happiness.

Not only do people who are physically active live a longer life, they are evidently optimistic about the future and can positively set out goals and aspirations that lead to pure self happiness. Doesn't the thought of being physically and emotionally happy motivate you to get off the couch?

Studies have also shown that those who force themselves to be active during a negative emotional state, consequently reverse the negative cycle and feel more positive and optimistic after engaging in activity. Although motivation is a key factor for engaging in physical activity, once an exercise routine is established, you will strengthen and increase the accessibility of positive resources to maintain a happy and healthy lifestyle.
Fascinating Fact #6: Flourishing after sickness

Can Positive Psychology aid people who are recovering from brain injuries to have a better quality of life?

The traditionally happy life encompasses aspects of pleasure, engagement and meaningfulness. After suffering from brain injuries people often find themselves unable to enjoy some or all of these aspects due to inability to continue with hobbies they may have had, engage with people on the same level as they may have previously, loss of sensations such as taste and smell and therefore often fall into depression.

Positive Psychology actually has the ability to foster posttraumatic growth, meaning it can make injury sufferers over-all happier (even more so than they were before). Positive psychology allows individuals to re-assess what is important in life, live more in the moment, identify what they are grateful for and to develop personal and intrapersonal goals for recovery. All this makes individuals with brain injuries more appreciative of all aspects of life and allows them to return to their social and physical lives faster.
Fascinating Fact #7: Flow
How the flow-state increases performance levels

When we enter a flow state we become absorbed in what we are doing, entering a kind of consistent experience which is seemingly effortless. Examples of this flow can be found in producing music or playing a sport. Psychologists Koehn et al. (2013) conducted research into different performance contexts and the production of the flow state, looking specifically at the way imagery and confidence levels interact to create flow.

Participants completed imagery and confidence measures before undertaking a field test. Measuring the performance of a tennis groundstroke, Koehn et al. (2013) found a significant interaction between imagery and confidence. Koehn et al. (2013) were able to demonstrate positive associations between imagery, confidence and the inducement of a flow state, which in turn predicts increased performance. In essence, the conduction of a flow state is seen to significantly increase performance levels in a given external task.
Fascinating Fact #8: Generosity

Generosity is intergenerational!

We live in a society where the act of giving and generosity occurs on a daily basis, despite whether the act is large or small. Researchers from Indiana University have found that there is a correlation between the generosity of parents and the generosity of their adult children. It was suspected that each family cultivated and instilled a sense of the joy of giving around the impressionable children. The strength of the intergenerational generosity was then correlated with income and wealth.

From this, it was found that the adult children’s giving elasticity was reciprocated in approximately the same magnitude as their parent’s giving elasticity. Therefore, it has been found that there is a relationship between parents’ secular giving and their adult children’s secular giving.

It can be concluded that parents who give generously to secular causes have adult children who have a high probability or reciprocating this generosity compared to parents who do not give generously to secular causes.
Fascinating Fact #9: Gratitude

Women are better at expressing their gratitude. Fact or fiction?

It is culturally accepted that women are the more nurturing, emotionally savvy sex but are they also more grateful? Curious researchers set out to see if the previous work, suggesting it was true, was in fact so.

Three individual studies were conducted testing different aspects of gratitude and the differences between the sexes in each. Study 1 showed that when evaluating gratitude women found it more interesting and exciting and less conflicting. In study 2 when describing the last time they were given a gift women reported less burden/obligation and greater gratitude than men. Study 3 followed men and women over 3 months, women who tested highly on a gratitude test were more likely to feel autonomous and connected. Men, however, derived fewer benefits from gratitude and were more critical of gratitude in general.

Perhaps it is not a question of who is better at gratitude but who benefits more from being grateful. And according to this study women are the clear beneficiaries.
Fascinating Fact #10: Happiness
Did you know that happiness can be found in the garbage?

Happiness has long believed to be related to material possessions and standards of living, both of which are dictated by our levels of income. New research however reveals that happiness may decrease as income increases, and only spending on leisure activities is related to our level of wellbeing. Family and friends, health and wellbeing, and the quality of our work have been found to provide greater levels of happiness.

In Leon, Nicaragua, most of the city’s inhabitants live below the poverty line. This has forced some residents to live in the rubbish dump, collecting and recycling rubbish for a living. Although these collectors are the poorest of the poor and socially scorned, interviews reveal that over 70% are happy and optimistic about a better future. Over 80% have strong social relationships and those that are happiest listen to the radio, read and partake in sport. Although some have access to electricity, television and mobile phones, these do not increase their levels of happiness. Overall, happiness appears to be based on the satisfaction these people find in different areas of their lives and is proof that money does not buy happiness!
Fascinating Fact #11: Health
A narrative a day keeps the doctor away

Writing about personal experiences in an emotional way for as little as 15 minutes a day over the course of three days can in fact improve mental and physical wellbeing. This incredible finding has been replicated across a range of ages, genders, cultures, social class and personality types. It was discovered that those who benefit the greatest from writing tend to use a high number of positive-emotion words, a moderate amount of negative-emotion words, and increase their use of cognitive words over the days of writing.

These findings suggest that personal narrative formation is a critical strategy for improving one’s mental and physical health as well as giving each person the chance to reflect on their personal behaviour, emotions and attitude on a daily basis. Ongoing studies have also further discovered that writing serves a function of organising of complex emotional experiences, further promoting a sense of connectedness with one’s self.
Fascinating Fact #12: Humility and compassion
It helps to be humble

Many factors can influence whether one decides to help or not. For example, certain aspects of personality have been found to impact on one’s helping behaviour. But does one’s level of humility have any influence?

Researchers at the University of Maine did three studies investigating the effect of humility on helpfulness. In the first study, it was found that participants who rated themselves as more humble, also rated themselves as more helpful. In a second and third study, participants were given the opportunity to help someone and those that were more humble, helped more.

Humble participants also spent more time helping their fellow students. This result was found even when previously found predictors of helping behaviour such as empathy were accounted for. These studies show that humble people are more likely to help, and when they do, they will help you for longer than those who are less humble.
Fascinating Fact #13: Medicine and drugs
Psilocybin: Just a hippie drug or tool of psychologists?

Psilocybin, a chemical released during the ingestion or "magic mushrooms" is most commonly associated with hippies and stoners. However, since the 90's work has begun on psychadelic drugs such as psilocybin and there potential to be used as a tool for psychologists.

A 2011 study found that after a few sessions of taking psilocybin, volunteers found positive effects on their moods, behaviors and attitudes. This was followed up 14 months later and the effects were found to have been sustained. People close to the volunteers also reported this increased positivity and most volunteers described it as a substantial personal and spiritual experience with significant impacts.
Fascinating Fact #14: Meditation
Practicing mindfulness meditation decreases sensitivity to pain!

Mindfulness is a concept derived from Buddha’s teachings. It allows people to be present in the moment and react less to things such as emotional and circumstantial experiences, regardless of if they are positive or negative. Human beings are susceptible to pain, however, the question is if this pain can be decreased by simple meditation?

At North Carolina University in the United States, experiments were conducted using electrical stimulation on participants. The participants were sent brief electrical pulses which increased and decreased in strength depending on each person’s pain tolerance.

Once each participant’s ratings on pain were recorded, the participant then practiced mindfulness meditation for 20 minutes each day over a period of three days. Once the three days were complete each participant’s ratings on pain were measured again using the same method. The experiment’s results showed that participant’s ratings on pain had significantly decreased since the commencement of the three day meditation. The participants were less susceptible to pain!
Fascinating Fact #15: Mindfulness

Being mindful can improve your working memory!

Mindfulness refers to the act of being attentive to the present moment, not the past or the future. It involves a certain level of awareness and a non-judgmental acceptance of the moment as it is, stripped of emotional reactivity. Working memory is the memory system that temporarily stores information in our minds for further recall and future processing. Many studies have been undertaken that suggest a strong interrelationship between attention and working memory.

VanVugt & Jha (2011) undertook research that involved taking a group of participants to an intensive month-long mindfulness retreat. These participants were compared with a control group who received no mindfulness training (MT). All participants from both groups first undertook a memory recognition task before any MT had been providing. A second round of a memory recognition task was then undertaken by all participants after the month’s training.

Results were positive – while accuracy levels were comparable across both groups, reaction times were much faster for the group that had received mindfulness training. These results suggested that MT leads to attentional improvements, particularly in relation to quality of information and decisional processes, which are directly linked to working memory.
Fascinating Fact #16: Motivation

Move your finger, and improve your motivation!

Psychologists believe the approach motivation system regulates people's emotions and behaviour to attain goals. Research has found that people high in approach motivation often experience more positive life events, good moods, and have better coping skills. Thus, it is important to create effective strategies for stimulating this system.

People use flexion movements of the arms or fingers to pull desirable stimuli toward themselves. Because this action is repeated many times across a lifetime, it is linked to the approach motivation system. Researchers at the University of Notre Dame used a task involving repeated finger flexions to try to stimulate the approach system. After 20 minutes of repetitive finger flexing, men showed increased approach motivation compared to men that did not. They also reported greater levels of fun-seeking, enjoyment of reward, and persistence on unsolvable anagrams.

Females did not show the same benefits. The researchers concluded that these results demonstrated the ability of flexing movements to enhance approach motivation. These may be the first steps in establishing an intervention that could be applied in a clinical setting.
Fascinating Fact #17: Nature and Environment

Nature: The free therapy for life

Have you ever noticed whilst gazing into the oceans waves or walking through an open field in the countryside that you suddenly felt extremely relaxed and at peace? For years we have been told that nature is good for us, but now there is scientific evidence to confirm this theory and help explain why.

Apparently, interacting with a natural environment (compared to a built up environment such as a city) allows our attention mechanisms a chance to replenish and restore themselves. This can lead to increased attention and a higher ability to reflect on our life problems. Not only that, exposure to nature has been shown to decrease negative behaviors such as aggression, anxiety and depression, and at the same time increase positive emotions and health.

Considering nature has absolutely no bad side effects, is readily available and doesn't cost a thing, it would make sense to make it our therapy of choice.
Fascinating Fact #18: Optimism
Will being optimistic help you to live a longer life?

Optimism has long been regarded as just a positive outlook on life, but recently, the astonishing health benefits of optimism have been revealed. Numerous studies have found that optimism is consistently related to longevity and physical and mental wellbeing, especially compared with pessimism.

A US study of nearly 100,000 students found that people who are optimistic are less likely than those who are pessimistic to die from Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) or from any other cause over an eight year period.

Similar studies have also confirmed this link between optimism and good health. The belief that good things will happen in life is called dispositional optimism and it has been strongly connected with improved recovery rates after surgery and improved cancer survival rates.

So what does this mean for you? If you want to enjoy a long and healthy life then it’s time to look at the bright side!
Fascinating Fact #19: Perception
Thinking of life’s hardships damages your health

Everyone experiences hardships in life and deals with them differently. Journalling, venting to significant others or thinking to oneself are common ways of coping with such events. But which ways are the best?

Researchers from University of California divided students into three groups to process negative life events differently: thinking, writing or talking. Each group processed the negative life events for fifteen minutes on three consecutive days. Students who thought about a negative life event reported worse mental health and satisfaction with life than those who wrote or talked about them.

Writing and talking organise negative life events through words, so that one can gain a sense of resolution and thus can better manage their emotions. Thinking is relatively disorganised because it contains words, images, emotions and memories and this can lead to thoughts repeating until they are organised. The researchers speculate that writing and talking allow one to release the pain of negative life experiences, whereas thinking internalises coping, enabling the pain to be relived and maintained.
Fascinating Fact #20: Positive Emotions

Your positive emotions can boost your physical health!

New studies show that being a more happy and optimistic person can have great benefits not only mental health but also physical health. Researchers at the University of North Carolina have found that social connections have a major contribution to the relationship between positivity and health.

They conducted a study where half of the 65 participants completed a loving-kindness meditation course, which involved meditating at home and learning how to foster positive feelings. They were told to report their emotional experiences and social interaction throughout the course. The other half of the participant’s were told that they were on a waiting list for meditation.

The researchers measured the vagal tone, which plays a role in heart rate regulation as well as social engagement before and after the course and found that those who participated in the meditation course had increases in positive emotion, which linked to more social connections. Whereas, those who didn’t participate had no increases.
Fascinating Fact #21: Resilience
You can foster resilience in a child

Providing a positive interaction for a child who may otherwise be overlooked due to behavioral issues may improve his/her chances of being resilient in the long term.

Jaffee, Caspit, Moffitt, Polo-Tomas & Taylor (2007) found that children who struggle with antisocial behavior such as aggression and poor social skills are often disregarded not only by their peers, but likewise by influential adults in their life. This study revealed the importance of providing children with positive social interactions which may enable them to call upon their strengths and become more resilient to adversity.

Another study confirms these findings; community resources and positive role models have been found to be influential in determining resilience in children. At risk children exposed to nurturing adults outside their familial environment have a better chance at coping with difficult circumstances they may encounter in life.
Fascinating Fact #22: Self Control
Bad moods are bad news for our self-control

Do you ever find that when you are in a bad mood, going to the beach seems like a better option than staying home to study for an exam? The type of mood we are in can determine the choices we make when it comes to indulgent behaviours like gambling, over-eating and procrastinating.

It has been found that when you are in a happy mood you are more likely to practice for an upcoming test compared to when you are in a bad mood. It is thought this is because when we are feeling negative we put fixing our mood ahead of using self-control. So rather than studying for a test, grumpy people will procrastinate and spend their time making themselves feel happier instead.

If you are trying to stick to a diet, or get an A on an assignment, instead of eating more pie or going to the beach, think positive thoughts and you might find the inner-strength you need to maintain your self-control.
Fascinating Fact #23: Self-concordant goal setting
Did you know that what goes up mustn’t always come down?

And the formula is surprisingly simple... Psychologists undertaking research at North American universities believe that setting self-concordant goals – truly intrinsic goals for which one feels ownership and identifies with – is the key towards embarking on a road of ever-increasing goal attainment. The explanation? Attainment of intrinsic goals leads to increased well-being as well as increased levels of motivation for attaining future goals. It’s a positive spiral of achievement.

Researchers expanded on previous studies of self-concordant goal attainment by undergoing two studies, varying in nature, but both of which required participants to generate and record a set number of goals, as well as rate whether the goals were externally or internally driven. They later reported whether they had attained those goals.

Results from both studies indicated that happiness is best pursued through long-term and incremental goal-setting and attainment. In particular, it was setting and attaining intrinsic, self-concordant goals that tended to lead to the most positive results in terms of well-being.
Fascinating Fact #24: Smiling and Laughter
Smile, for it might actually make you happier

While it might seem unlikely, psychologists at the University of Kansas have found that smiling may actually make someone happier. Although it might seem intuitive that smiles are a result, not a cause, of feeling happy, the researchers found that forcing a smile can lead to less stress.

In the study, published in the journal Psychological Science, 170 participants were asked to place two chopsticks between their teeth. The chopsticks were placed in a manner that either activated the facial muscles to produce a smile, or neutral expression. While the chopsticks were in position, the participants were asked to perform two difficult, stressful tasks. By measuring their heart rates, the researchers found that the participants producing smiles recovered from the stressful tasks quicker.

This demonstrates the potential positive effects of smiling, even if it is unnatural, in a stressful situations. So next time you are in a stressful situation, such as getting an injection, forcing a smile may just make it more bearable, leaving you happier.
Fascinating Fact #25: Stress reduction

Feeling stressed? Tune in...

Not only can listening to music reduce stress levels, but it also can contribute to increased well-being in stressful and painful environments.

Music engagement has shown to be more effective than progressive muscle relaxation in relieving stress. A study was conducted that subjected patients being treated for coronary heart disease to music on a regular basis. The results reflected that patients who listened to music on a regular basis had decreased levels of stress and anxiety. In conjunction with this, patients felt an increase relaxation and positive emotions after being subjected to the music.

Music acts as a distractor, focusing patient’s attention away from negative stimuli to something more pleasant an encouraging. Music intervention can be a tool to influence positive emotions and reduce stress by creating an environment that stimulates and maintains relaxation, well-being and comfort. The reduction of stress and anxiety creates a more positive environment, and emphasis and focus is shifted on happiness and pleasure, influencing well-being and positivity.
Fascinating Fact #26: Therapy
Reality Check: Therapy boosts self-regulation

Treatment for people with developmental disabilities has changed over the past 40 years, from deinstitutionalization to working with the individuals to plan methods of treatment. Therapies today are aimed at assisting individuals in being able to emotionally and mentally support themselves (self-determination). Which therapy works best?

A doctor from Wayne State University looked at whether or not reality-based group therapy (problem solving in the present) promoted self-determination for persons with developmental disabilities more than support group therapy by looking at four characteristic of self-determination.

Self-regulation (regulating and taking control of one’s own actions and emotions) of participants in the reality therapy was the only characteristic that showed a significant increase. The implications showed that group therapy could be useful for adults with developmental disabilities. Some limitations were a small sample size, a test measure that was adapted from a children’s version, and that the test measure had some open questions, which could have had a testing bias.
Fascinating Fact #27: Values
What is a life worth living?

According to positive psychology, one of the ways in which we can make ourselves feel good and induce positive emotions is to live a life that is in alignment with our core values. We all have core values that define the essence of who we are. Some people base theirs on the importance of family and friends and living a healthy lifestyle. Other important values may be respect, integrity and a good work ethic. Once we define our core values, we can ask ourselves how well does my life align with these values? The point is that in order to live an authentic life, our core values should drive all our decisions and actions. When our choices are in alignment with these values, we are living an authentic life and feel good about ourselves.

Work for a cause, not applause.
Live to express, not to impress.
Live by choice, not by chance.
Make changes, not excuses.
Be motivated, not manipulated.
Work to excel, not compete.
Listen to your inner voice
For therein lies the answer to a life worth living.

~Author Unknown~
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