

Making a Habit of Happiness: A Three Week Lived Experience of Positive Thinking

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Abstract

This article examines the notion that through a commitment to positive thinking, happiness, much like daily physical fitness, can become a healthy habit. Using a phenomenological lens, the author conducted a three week lived experience to explore the plausibility of using various techniques, such as short meditation, cue words and positive affirmations, to decrease negative thinking, increase feelings of well-being and enhance relationships. The article also references the revised Health and Physical Education curriculum in Ontario (2010) and suggests that in order for Health Literacy to become a reality in the schools, teachers must model mental *health* and shift the focus of pedagogical practice to mental fitness (as suggested by WHO 2005). Using excerpts from a daily journal recorded “in the moment” to ensure authenticity and spontaneity, the author invites the reader to examine the question: What would it be like to be aware and in control of [one’s] thoughts to the point that as soon as [one] recognizes a thought as negative, unproductive or judgemental [he/she] stops and uses a positive word, phrase or affirmation to redirect it? Ultimately, this article serves to open dialogue around the emerging concept of sustaining positive mental health (versus negativity or illness), offers strategies for improving the lives of teachers and students, and demonstrates that replacing negative thoughts with positive ones has the potential to nourish the individual and influence his/her relationships.

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The revised Health and Physical Education Curriculum document (2010) serves as a reminder of the importance of health for our children and our schools in the province of Ontario, Canada. The document embraces a message of prevention with a focus on balance. In particular, the Healthy Living Strand spotlights emotional well-being and positive mental health by balancing the physical, intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual

aspects of a child’s life and states: “A person with good mental health is able to think, feel, act, and interact in a way that permits him or her to enjoy life while being able to cope with challenges that arise” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p.33). Health literacy has been established as a goal of the new health curriculum which will serve students by enriching their sense of connectedness with the world and with themselves through reflective awareness (Anderson & Booth, 2006, p.30). The revised curriculum indicates that educators must serve as role models for our impressionable children: the integral teacher-student experience. The

influence of an educator who embodies positive thinking would, in my opinion, have a more powerful and effective impact than one reading a script or handing out worksheets to students about the topic. Considering the dim prediction that the 2nd largest contributor to the disease burden by the year 2020 will be depression (WHO, 2001c) it is totally justified that more attention is being given to the role of positive mental health and prevention of disease. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) “mental health implies fitness rather than freedom from disease” (WHO, 2001c, p.14). If educators are to truly embrace this approach to holistic health, than they must lead the way and set a positive example. It is not enough, in my opinion, for educators to be passive in this endeavour. Rather, they have an obligation to embody the philosophy and find ways of promoting positive mental well-being for themselves so that it can transcend to the lived experience of the student.

Paradigm Shift

Over the past decade, increasingly more attention has been given to research that promotes positive mental health, particularly for children and adolescents. Recent research in the area of mindfulness (Burke, 2009; Huppert & Johnson, 2010; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010) suggests that there is a need to shift the spotlight from treatment to prevention. Proponents for using mindfulness meditation techniques such as MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction) and MBCT (mindfulness-based cognitive therapy) with children and adolescents recognize that much of the work done so far has been focused on treating problems (Burke, 2009; Huppert & Johnson, 2010) and not on preventing and maintaining health.

Mindfulness is a way of paying attention and bringing a conscious awareness to the present moment (as cited in Huppert & Johnson, 2010, p.265) and mindfulness practices can produce a calming and centring effect because at the core is the concept of being open, receptive and non-judgmental (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010).

Definitions of mindfulness are proliferative, yet the common theme intersecting all explanations is that mindfulness is a way of focusing one’s attention in the present and not ruminating in the past or galloping ahead to the future (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Often the phrase ‘clearing one’s mind’ is used in reference to mindfulness, yet what mindfulness really proposes is simply just being where you are without labelling it as good or bad: judgments based heavily on one’s perception of a situation. Since published evidence about the effectiveness of mindfulness based approaches is predominately with adults, this area of research for use with children and adolescents is still considered to be a novel field (Burke, 2010, p. 136). However, it is important to mention in order to provide context about the availability of approaches that are concerned with the promotion of well-being and individual happiness.

The field of positive psychology centres around the goal of increasing individual happiness and enhancing positive qualities through the use of psychological interventions (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010; Seligman, Ernest, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009; Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). Although a related concept to mindfulness, positive psychology focuses on the goal of building and sustaining happiness (Seligman & Steen, 2005), rather than on accepting the present moment experience without judgment (Burke, 2009). Proponents of positive psychology contend that positive emotions help buffer against depression (Seligman et al., 2006) and positive emotions signal and produce a state called “flourishing” (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 218). According to Fredrickson (2001) “...positive emotions are worth cultivating, not just as end states in themselves but also as a means to achieving psychological growth and improved well-being over time” (p. 218). This is the direction of my three-week lived experience. Although I would argue that some of my methods invoked a mindfulness approach, overall my goal was to

identify negative thoughts and promote positive thinking in my daily life.

Where it all started

In my own practice, I began to see a pattern between my ability to connect with myself in a positive way, and my students being able to harness that positive energy within the classroom. Perhaps it was my perception of the situation because negative instances were not magnified when I was feeling centred and optimistic. I also started recognizing that when my mind was not focused and clear, when my mood was not calm and positive, or when I was “pushing” through a lesson without being mindful of the teachable moments, my students behaved much differently. Changes were subtle, but noticeable if I was attuned to the situation. The lessons at times resembled a graceful dance with participants joining in and stepping out with a natural ebb and flow. However, this could change depending on my energy and the “vibe” created within the space and turn into a kind of tug-of-war, void of the harmonious exchange I had come to enjoy.

The Question

Those reflections of my own teaching practice propelled me to wonder: What would it be like to be aware of my thoughts so that as soon as I recognize a thought as negative, unproductive or judgmental, I would stop and use a positive word, phrase or affirmation to redirect it? I was curious to find out if I could make positive thinking a habit. Much like someone commits to daily exercise or a healthy eating plan, I was committing myself to daily positive thinking. My metaphoric junk food would be negative thoughts and my goal was to cut out those needless negative calories by replacing them with healthy, positive options that would, hopefully, impact my daily happiness and my relationships.

The Plan

I decided to undertake a three week experiment to personally examine the effects that positive

thinking would have on my daily life and on my interactions with those I encountered along my optimistic journey. I outlined a daily plan that would have me meditate for 5 minutes each morning while focusing on a positive affirmation for the day (see Appendix A for a sample of my affirmation inspired by Louise Hay). My goal here was to simply find 5 quiet and peaceful moments to help centre myself before the hectic realities of life as a full-time Master’s student, wife and mother to a four-year-old monopolized my day. It is important to point out that the act of being fully present in the meditation experience required mindfulness, which I will define as focusing my attention to the current moment and allowing thoughts to enter and exit my mind without judgement or contemplation. The focus of my study was to use techniques more aligned with positive psychology or intervention when I recognized a negative thought. Yet, I had to be true to myself and calming my mind felt like a comfortable starting position from which to begin each day. Quieting my thoughts was one challenge: the other was documenting my thoughts.

In terms of data collection I would have my trusty Blackberry ready to record, using an application called Voice Notes, my reflections as they happened throughout the day. I wanted my reflections to be honest, unrehearsed and “in the moment”. I wanted to document: (1) when I became aware of a negative or judgemental thought; (2) what strategy I used to re-direct my thoughts to reflect a more positive approach; (3) any feelings, physical aches and any unconscious reactions that were associated with the negative thoughts; (4) interactions with people throughout this process. Since I am a full-time student this year, I would not be able to see how this daily experience might impact the climate of my classroom, but my motivation for undertaking this experience was to witness the impact this would have on my own well-being and to recognize the opportunity that positive thinking has for those we encounter on a daily basis in our lives. As I embarked on this three week journey, I was clearly focused on two key goals: (1) to

examine the lived experience of infusing daily life with positive thinking techniques to better understand the potential benefits and transformation that could occur; (2) to examine the implications that this might have for further inquiry, particularly within schools and the health education curriculum.

Getting Started

On the first day I approached my challenge with optimism and excitement. I went to the gym, but my sore back prevented me from getting comfortable enough to really relax and engage in the full 5-minute meditation. Having re-located to a smaller rental property for the year while finishing my degree, I often looked for creative places to steal quiet moments to myself. The women's gym where I worked out regularly happened to be one of them. On this day I wrote:

Even though I couldn't participate in the full 5 - minute mediation, I still felt sort of calmed and centred because of the deep breathing. I found connecting with my breath very beneficial.

Breathing – the kind that gloriously and purposefully fills your lungs - was the one thing I found easy to incorporate into my daily life and beneficial. Have you ever just stopped to take in a full, nourishing breath? Often, we are racing around, unaware of just how much influence our breath has on our physical bodies. In his book *Positive Living Skills: Joy and focus for everyone*, Terry Orlick describes activities that focus on keeping children thinking positively and one effective strategy for helping children relax quickly is called One-Breath Relaxation. It is described as follows:

...I want you to slowly breathe in, taking in one long, slow deep breath. As you breathe in feel the air slowly filling your body. Then slowly breathe out – letting all the air and tension flow out of your body. (Orlick, 2011, p. 185)

This is a technique I used more than any other during my three week journey. Sometimes it was the only way to really stop my negative thoughts from steamrolling through my mind. Negative thoughts, I realized, are insidious: they creep along without us being aware of their power to push the positive thoughts to the periphery of our mind. One day I was feeling some of what I term “mommy guilt”. My metaphorical plate was heaped with obligations and I could not clear them with the expedience I had come to expect of myself. On this night, I was running late from my evening class, had forgotten to make Jell-o for my daughter's lunch as promised and would not make it home in time to sneak a goodnight kiss before she drifted off to sleep. I wrote:

I find that breathing deeply especially is very important to reconnect and I have to talk to myself. I have to stop the [negative] chatter in my head and again repeat the positive affirmations to myself. It took a little more tonight, but I'm feeling good now but it did take a bus ride which is about thirty minutes, so again it was just about breathing and looking at the positive and being grateful and that was really helpful.

My positive affirmations consisted of short phrases of inspiration such as “I am a WOW, a 9 or 10” or “I have power over my thoughts” or a cue word such as “happy.” A cue word serves as a personal reminder and is directly related to a person's individual goal (Patterson & Orlick, 2011, p. 77). I wrote my affirmations on the white board hanging in front of my desk as a reminder of my goal: to excel as a student and earn my Master of Education degree. I wanted to view my coursework as an opportunity for growth and not as a catalyst to rattle my confidence. I learned that my ability to refocus on the positive did not miraculously banish all negative thoughts, but the more I focused on the positive affirmations and cue words when a negative thought did creep into my consciousness, the easier it was stop the “emotional rumination” (Kyriacou, 2001, p. 7)

that can prolong feelings of tension or stress. Allowing the ‘worst case scenario’ to percolate in our mind serves only to disconnect us from the positive connection of an experience (Patterson & Orlick, 2011, p. 70).

Half-way Point

The more I practiced positive thinking, the more I became aware of the commitment required to maintain this positive lifestyle habit. It was something that I worked at each day and the more I did it, the more habit forming it became. Indeed, by the second week I was keenly cognisant of the impact this daily exercise was having on my life:

When I do slip and think of a negative thought it actually jars me a little bit. The more you stay in a positive frame of mind the more you really recognize the negative. I totally see how easy it is to fill our minds with negative thoughts [because] they come in so easily and I find with having done these activities over the last week and a half it's easier for me to switch my mind into a positive frame very quickly [because] I have something at the ready to switch on.

I also realized that my dedication to this activity was more than spouting off uplifting phrases and feel-good words. By mid-point I was beginning to understand that turning one's thoughts around was not simply about positive platitudes, nor was it an insurmountable climb to the top of a proverbial mountain top. It was about a genuine awareness and an authentic desire for betterment for myself and those around me. You have control over your thoughts because you are the only one thinking in your mind (Hay, 1984, p.66; Orlick, 1998 p.9) Individuals can make a conscious decision to focus on what is positive or, alternately, get weighted down by stress and negativity.

How it All Connects

The great Chinese philosopher Chu His (1130-1200) has written: “When one knows something

but has not yet acted on it, his knowledge is still shallow. After he has experienced it, his knowledge will be increasingly clear...” (1963, p.609).

The interconnectedness of the mind and body is integral to Eastern approaches to health and it is believed “that human emotion has a direct health impact on the human body” (Lu, 2006, p. 79). Likewise, my three week lived experience taught me about interconnectedness on several levels. One of my recorded comments recognizes “...that positive energy is not just restorative but also transferable or contagious.” We are social beings and that means our lives are *influenced* by our environment and the people in it; however, we are also instrumental in *influencing* our environment and the people in it. Orlick (1998) suggests that although human contact can be a source of stress, it can also bring great joy to one's life through simple sharing (e.g., a warm smile) or through a meaningful experience (e.g., a kind word).

Several times throughout my journey I experienced what might be considered by some to be inconsequential interactions with others, but by simply being in a positive state and extending positive energy I felt like I attracted moments that otherwise might have slipped past me had I been unconscious of my mood.

Okay so this is crazy. I'm standing in Wal-Mart...and I decide I'm just going to stand and smile and be aware of who's around me and what happens when I just stand here...I am smiling and exuding positive energy...a woman comes up to me and taps my arm and she points to the water cooler I just purchased and says “you're going to love it”...it's crazy but [I'm just] standing here smiling and that's what I attracted.

In another instance I was in the kitchen making dinner:

What I've noticed while cutting onions is how happy my daughter is. It's as if she can feel my energy and my husband's energy. We're both at home, happy, chatting about the day's events, and there's just a positive energy and she feels it. She's full of life - giggling...almost a little bit silly...because everybody is so happy...Your mental state [positive or negative] has an important influence.

The benefits of the social environment on learning (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007) go beyond the classroom. Researchers understand the importance of modelling to enhance skill acquisition and self-efficacy in children (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007) but I would propose that setting a positive example in our community, at the grocery store or in one's kitchen incrementally enhances the quality of our daily experiences with those around us. Can it be as simple as pushing aside our negative thoughts and concentrating on the positive ones to influence our daily lives in small but meaningful ways?

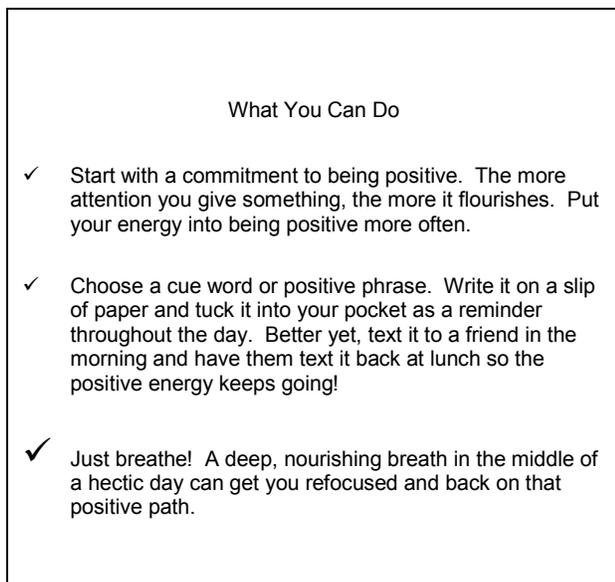
If I Can Do It, So Can You

The purpose of my three week endeavour was to embrace awareness to ultimately feel more connected to my own thoughts and to the people whom I encounter on a daily basis. The lesson was a salient one: if you are consistent and committed to positive thinking it can develop into a routine. Infusing our every day with positivity in the hopes of diminishing negative influences has implications for improving one's outlook on life and it holds the promise of affecting the lives of those around us in positive ways. Imagine modelling positive thinking on a daily basis so that students could see how the process actually works? Think about changing

the words you say to yourself and adjusting the thoughts you think the moment they enter your mind. My three week lived experience has taught me that each one of us can *choose* to make happiness a habit (see Figure 1).

On the second to last day of my experiment, I had been up all night with a sick child and just wanted to get my groceries and go home to take a nap. I had hoped that my final recorded journal entry would be revelatory and succinctly uplifting. Instead, I realized that life is unpredictable; we are all going to feel grumpy sometimes and even those with the best intentions have bad days. The point is not to stay there.

I've had a couple of sleepless nights because my baby was up with a fever and it's challenging, to stay in a positive state when there's other factors like life and being tired...And that's what I'm learning about the most: it's about commitment. It's about wanting the positive more than the negative. It's about being committed to it and it's about longevity. It's about consistency, doing it everyday. I don't think we can teach positive mental health to students once a week...and then leave them alone and have them forget about it. I think this has to be integrated everyday...it has to be a regular day. It has to be normal. Positive affirmations and being positive and working on yourself so that you can maintain that healthy, positive mindset needs to be something you do everyday like brushing your teeth or incorporating some physical activity. There needs to be that element so that we can teach our children and affect those around us...I'm going to continue to use my cue word [happy] as I do my grocery shopping!

Figure 1. *Three suggestions for making happiness a habit.*

Appendix A

The following is a sample of a positive affirmation that I would use during my 5 minute meditation in the morning or throughout the day as needed. It was inspired by an affirmation in Louise Hay's book *You Can Heal Your Life*. I kept it on a piece of paper in my pocket as a reminder.

I release the need to question my abilities. I am smart, strong and confident. I live in harmony and balance with everyone around me. I see only the good in people – myself included. Only I have power over my thoughts. All is well in my world

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