
FIGHT JOB DISSATISFACTION WITH A DOSE OF POSITIVITY

In his 2002 book, *“Authentic Happiness,”* Martin Seligman, the “father” of the positive psychology movement, observed: “In a recent poll, 52 percent of practicing lawyers described themselves as dissatisfied... In addition to being disenchanting, lawyers are in remarkably poor mental health.” We don’t know that much is changed in the ensuing decade with respect to either satisfaction or mental health. But, Barbara Fredrickson, a distinguished psychology professor at the University of North Carolina, has authored a remarkable book, *“Positivity,”* which may offer us a way out.

According to Fredrickson, positivity comes in 10 forms: joy, gratitude, serenity, interests, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love. She maintains that positive emotions “broaden and build” our competency as humans. Positive emotions open our hearts and our minds, making us more receptive and more creative. Moreover, by opening our hearts and minds, positive emotions allow us to discover and build new skills, new ties, new knowledge and a new way of being in the world.

Living in positivity offers a number of benefits. First, it feels good. Second, positivity changes the way your mind works. Third, it transforms your future, literally bringing out the best of you and, through repeated experience, creates greater optimism and resiliency. Fourth, positivity reduces your negativity, by working like a “reset” button. Fifth, the effects of positivity are non-linear. You reach a “tipping point” at which a small change in attitude reaps enormous life benefits. Your life simply begins to flourish. Finally, Fredrickson shows how you can consciously increase your positivity.

Frederickson proposes that there is a specific ratio - 3 to 1 - that constitutes the positivity tipping point. That means to move into a flourishing life, for every negative emotional experience that you endure, you also must experience at least three heartfelt positive experiences. This is both a short and long-term practice and goal.

From her studies, Fredrickson has witnessed and documented that positivity helps you grow psychologically, mentally, socially and physically. People, who experience more positivity in their lives, grow psychologically by becoming more optimistic, resilient, open, accepting and driven by purpose. They grow cognitively by becoming more present in the moment, allowing for more appreciation of what is going on around them. They also build enduring mental habits of openness, allowing for more thoughtful consideration of ways to procure outcomes, leading to greater collaboration and creativity. Socially, they are energized, making them more attractive. That attraction leads to the creation of more and better personal relationships. They share their positivity with others, leading to the creation of a greater sense of community. Positivity also has been shown to affect biological markers of health such as lower blood pressure, less pain, fewer colds, and better sleep. In other words, positivity predicts greater longevity.

In examining the positivity ratio, you should be mindful of two principles of psychology. The first is the *negativity bias*, which maintains that a negative experience is stronger than a positive experience. The second is the *positivity offset*, which maintains, with some exceptions, that our lives are more positive than negative. The positivity ratio essentially is an assessment of how much time you spend positively versus how much you spend negatively. Recognize that you will have your good days and your bad. So what matters most is not your ratio for a day or even a week. What matters is your ratio over time.



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For your life to flourish, repeated experiments have shown that you must maintain a positivity ratio of 3 to 1. Below that ratio, positivity remains inert, overwhelmed by the power of negativity. However, you build your positivity even when you are far below that ratio. But it needs to accumulate and compound to reach the critical 3 to 1 tipping point, at which point its beneficial effects emerge.

To assess your own positivity ratio, Fredrickson has created a Web site specifically for that purpose. Go to www.positivityratio.com to access the Positivity Self Test and the tracking tools for your results. Just to appropriately set your expectations, it is highly unlikely that you will now meet that 3 to 1 ratio. This should not cause you distress. It just means you have to start the work. And, like all good things, the work takes time.

It should come as no surprise that if you're trying to improve the ratio, you have three choices - reduce the denominator, increase the numerator, or both.

Let's begin by considering reducing negativity. It may be the fastest, most efficient way to increase your ratio. Negative emotions have their place. They can be useful, appropriately keeping you grounded, real and honest. But, you can reduce gratuitous negativity by undertaking a number of practices. First, dispute your negative thoughts. Are they based in fact? If not, don't suppress or push them away. Rather, challenge them and they will dissolve. Second, break the grip of rumination through which you go over your negative thoughts and feelings. You need to become aware enough to know that you are ruminating. Then, choose to do something altogether different (fundamentally, this can be any activity that lifts your mood). Third, train your mind to observe the negativity that constantly is running through it and, by such attention, loosen its grip. Meditation is helpful here, but not required. You must learn to pay attention, to not react, and to acknowledge that a negative thought is only that - a thought.

Fredrickson distinguishes necessary negativity from gratuitous negativity. Necessary negativity, in her assessment, helps you stay healthy, productive and grounded in reality. There, you face the facts and move forward. In contrast, gratuitous negativity doesn't lead you anywhere good. It's excessive, redundant, and ugly. "You'll come to recognize that by its sheer size relative to the circumstances at hand." It is negativity for negativity's sake.

Finally, be mindful of your surroundings. What is the nature of the media that you access? You can make substitutions. Likewise, you can choose to walk away from situations filled with gossip, sarcasm and other forms of verbal aggression. When you confront negativity that can't be avoided, you have three choices: modify the situation, attend to different aspects of the situation, or change the situation's meaning. Now, let's examine the numerator: How do you increase your positivity? Fredrickson suggests the obvious - you have to slow down to be able to perceive the goodness that already surrounds you. You also have to be sincere about your quest. Positivity that is not felt in your heart and body does not register. It is empty. You have to begin to find positive meaning more frequently within your present circumstances. It is always possible to reframe negative circumstances in a positive light. It just takes practice. It also is useful to find "good within the good" by savoring the goodness that you may take for granted or are overlooking. Savoring is not analysis; it is awareness. Share your savoring with others. It is an act of generosity and kindness.

Live with passion. Give yourself permission to do what you love. Dream about your future in great detail. Take the opportunity to do more of what you do best. Exercising your strengths and making contributions through them is both gratifying and boosts your positivity. Purposefully seek out others who support you. Make connections. People flourish most often in the company of others. Cultivate your caring.

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Connect with nature. Spending 20 minutes or more outside each day increases your positivity. Being in nature is even better, as it brings with it both fascination and vastness to expand your attention. Calm and open your mind through meditation, yoga or other practices. An open mind and positivity appear to go hand in hand. They eradicate those habits of mind that constrain and compartmentalize your experience. Practice bringing empathy and compassion into your life. Forgive yourself and forgive others. Practice gratitude. If you observe your day closely, you will find endless opportunities to give thanks. Make it a ritual.

You shouldn't take all these practices on at once. Try one or two on for size. But, remember, these are practices - not an occasional exercise. They require discipline, commitment and a strong intention to succeed.

Study yourself. Think about the occasions at which you most frequently feel each of the 10 positive emotions. What are the triggers for these states? Pull together objects and mementos that evoke positive emotions. Surround yourself with them. Is there any reason not to feel good more often?

If you want to feel better, broaden your mind, build your resources, fuel your resilience, and increase your longevity. You now have the tools to get you there. So, what is holding you back?

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