**When You Think You’re Positive (But You’re Really Not)**

*Cultivating positivity in an authentic way*

*By: Danielle Palli*

As I was driving to a routine doctor’s appointment, mentally preparing for this article (and all the ways I could approach positivity), I hit a roadblock … a metaphorical one. I had neglected to call the office before-hand to find out if there were protocols in place because of Covid-19. *Surely, they require everyone to wear a mask? But what if they don’t? Maybe they’ll have a sign on the door telling us to stay in our cars and phone when we arrive. But what if people are permitted to march right into a crowded waiting room? How sterile is the environment, and what if someone in the* (imaginary, crowded) *waiting room is sick?*

So much for positivity. I was on a downward spiral. In reality, there was a sign on the door with instructions. People did wear masks. Seats in the waiting area were spread out. There was hand sanitizer at the counter, and everyone’s temperature was checked upon arrival. Had these protocols not been in place, then I could have simply decided not to keep my appointment, gotten back into my car, and returned home. Not only did I lose a half-hour of cultivating positive emotions while driving, but I managed to stress myself out in the process.

I know I’m not alone. We all likely know at least one person who in one breath shares what a positive person they are and then spends the next twenty minutes pointing out everything negative about the people and world around them. “Why can’t they all be optimistic and happy, like me,” they wonder.He or she may insist that they are just observing their surroundings, and what they are observing happens to be negative. However, isn’t it interesting how two people can observe the same person or event but have a very different (potentially more positive) experience?

So, I offer four tips for cultivating positive thoughts and emotions, with the full awareness that even I, an unbridled optimist, fail at sometimes … a side effect of being human.

**Four Ways to Cultivate Positive Thinking** (MUGS or GUMS, it’s up to you.)

**1. Mindfulness** – We tend to describe feelings in very polarized ways, such as “happy” or “sad.” But according to Positive Psychologist, [Barbara Fredrickson, Ph.D.,](https://www.amazon.com/Love-2-0-Finding-Happiness-Connection/dp/0142180475) positive emotions, in particular, are more nuanced. She describes ten variations to the emotion we would describe as happy: Joy, Hope, Gratitude, Interest, Pride, Serenity, Awe, Amusement, Inspiration, Love.

One way to practice mindfulness for developing positivity is by simply checking in at random times throughout the day and noticing one’s thoughts and feelings. If you notice a positive thought, which of the ten positive emotions is it? If it’s a negative thought, can you acknowledge it and then choose a new thought? Can you examine the ten positive emotions list and focus on one? For example, if I chose to focus on *awe*, then I would close my eyes and call to mind situations that inspire awe: a sunset on the beach, choral voices singing in unison, watching cows grazing in a field, etc. (No one said that we had to agree *what* situations inspire awe!)

**2. Unplugging** – Many people may remember Facebook’s fun psychological [experiment](https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/06/everything-we-know-about-facebooks-secret-mood-manipulation-experiment/373648/) back in 2014 where they purposefully showed some users more positive posts and others more negative posts, and tracked people’s moods. They learned that emotions are contagious, and negative posts could leave the reader feeling worse than they did before logging in.

Social media also opens us up to social comparison (leading to feelings of personal failure and envy), mispredicting that having something will make us happier (but then it doesn't), and miswanting (being wrong about what and how much you will like something in the future ). Couple that with misunderstandings that can occur in an electronic format, which is largely text and devoid of tone of voice and body language, and you potentially have a maelstrom that can lead to a downward spiral.

Practice unplugging (and go be mindful!), for a day, a week, or longer. You might even decide that you will unplug the same day(s) each week. In addition to a social media fast, consider unplugging your phone, TV, computer, and avoid all “screen time.” You’ll be amazed at how quiet and peaceful the world suddenly becomes.

**3. Gratitude –** Gratitude expert, Robert Emmons, Ph.D., tells us that practicing gratitude *amplifies, rescues* and *connects.* In other words, a regular focus on gratitude amplifies positive emotions, it rescues us from negative and stressful thoughts (thereby boosting our immune system), and it connects us with others, promoting pro-social behaviors and strengthened relationships. In his [numerous books on gratitude](https://www.amazon.com/Robert-A.-Emmons/e/B001ITXVO4%3Fref=dbs_a_mng_rwt_scns_share), he encourages people to get creative about gratitude, to include journaling, gratitude meditations, being mindful about the words you use to describe situations (e.g. “I *have* to” vs. “I *get* to.”), and exploring gratitude through the senses (e.g. “I am grateful every time I get to walk barefoot on the beach and feel the cool sand and smell the salty air.”).

**4. Savoring –** To me, this is a hybrid of #1-3: being mindful, unplugging, and expressing gratitude. When you experience a positive moment, stop, and take it in through all of your senses. Notice what you feel physically and emotionally. Then … stay with that positivity for at least ten seconds longer than you normally would. If you hug a loved one, hug a little longer. If you are in awe of the sunset, stop everything and take it in. Stop at random times throughout the day to notice what’s around you, lock in on something that promotes positive feelings, and focus on it for a few moments.

Most important? Be authentic with your MUGS (or GUMS). Those positive moments don’t have to be earth-shattering. They will likely be a collection of very small events. This also doesn’t mean that we avoid noticing the bad and practice Pollyannaism out of context (i.e. Unbridled optimism in a situation that may call for a different emotion). It’s simply making the conscious choice to focus on the upward spiral.