

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

February 28, 2013

C. Nathan DeWall, University of Kentucky, and renowned textbook author and APS Fellow David G. Myers, Hope College, have teamed up to create a new series of Observer columns aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom. Each column will offer advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bi-monthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to non-experts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

[Teaching Students About the Sunny Side of Stress](#)

[Teaching Students About How Simple, Positive Activities Can Increase Well-Being](#)

Teaching Students About the Sunny Side of Stress

by C. Nathan DeWall

[Jamieson, J. P., Mendes, W. B., & Nock, M. \(2013\). Improving acute stress responses: The power of reappraisal. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22, 51–56.](#)

Imagine giving a public speech that will determine your lifetime career path. You gaze at the audience members, who stare at you emotionless and bored. A young student twirls his hair. A senior faculty member massages her temples, as if you caused her pain before you uttered your first word. Silence then overtakes the room. You try to start speaking, but you forget your opening line. Your forehead drips sweat. Your throat bunches up and makes you mute. Your heart goes into overdrive. Not 10 seconds into your speech, stress has ruined your hopes and dreams. Stress — that bogeyman that derails performances, relationships, and well-being — defeated you again.

Or did it? People overlook the benefits of stress, according to recent research by Jeremy Jamieson and Matthew Nock, both at Harvard University, and APS Fellow Wendy Berry Mendes at the University of California, San Francisco. Just as people can use a hammer as a weapon or a tool, people can use stress to harm or to enhance their performance. Stress wields negative power over people because they don't consider that it can function as a tool that aids performance, a process called *arousal reappraisal*. When people use arousal reappraisal, they reap the benefits of stress: stress kick-starts the body to take action that aids physical and behavioral responses. They show better cardiovascular reactivity, less attention to threat, and faster recovery. Activities become challenges instead of threats. In one powerful example,

students who used arousal reappraisal while taking a practice Graduate Record Examination (GRE) test performed better than students who did not, which helped explain their later successful performance on the actual test (Jamieson et al., 2010).

Stress is complicated. But it is easy to teach students how to harness the benefits of stress through arousal reappraisal. Jamieson says, “What we try to do is teach people to reframe their conceptualization of stress. For a student taking a high-pressure test, the situation is objectively demanding. If that student copes by seeking to drop their arousal level (i.e., ‘relaxing’) their body will be less efficient at delivering blood to their brains. However, if the student can maintain their arousal but reappraise the stress as adaptive they will experience ‘challenge,’ which facilitates performance.”

Putting this teaching strategy to the test, Jamieson teamed up with mathematics professor Aaron Altose, at Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland, Ohio, to examine whether arousal reappraisal would improve community college math course performance. Though quite preliminary, Jamieson said that their study showed that “reappraisal instructions helped to improve test performance and raise retention rates.”

Stress hits students from all sides. To teach them about stress and arousal reappraisal, instructors might have students list stresses they experience at school, in their friendships, with their family, at work, or in their extracurricular activities. Next, students could discuss whether the stress impaired or improved their performance, interactions, or well-being. The instructor could write some of the stresses and their effects on the blackboard and encourage the class to discuss why certain life domains cause more stress than others. Do students experience more stress at school or in their friendships? In which domain do students use arousal reappraisal more frequently? How might students use arousal reappraisal to transform the stress they experience?

Taking a step back, instructors can ask students why people don’t naturally use arousal reappraisal. Why do we suffer from stress when we could use it to our advantage? To get discussion started, instructors might ask whether animals can use arousal reappraisal to use stress to their advantage. When fireworks spook a golden retriever, for example, why doesn’t it use arousal reappraisal? A large reason is that dogs, cats, and other animals don’t have conscious reasoning ability. Without that ability, animals cannot use arousal reappraisal to shift their mental experience of stress. Instructors can encourage students to discuss possible evolutionary advantages of being able to use arousal reappraisal.

In another activity, students discuss cultural factors that influence stress. For example, how might a person’s cultural background change what stresses them? Consider surfing the Internet. If you live in a country where the government censors and monitors Internet use, using an Internet browser might cause you stress. Also, how might cultural norms influence whether arousal reappraisal is considered an appropriate coping strategy? Students may have visited cultures that encourage citizens to suppress their stress. Encourage them to discuss their experiences. Why might cultures encourage suppression given what we now know about the benefits of arousal reappraisal?

A final activity encourages students to consider how age influences arousal reappraisal use. Students are asked to map their lives into five-year increments (age 0 to age 80). Next, students list the biggest stressor they experienced or anticipate experiencing at each age. Finally, students discuss how they could use arousal reappraisal to confront each stressor. Why would they use arousal reappraisal instead

of other emotion regulation strategies, such as venting or suppressing? Were they less able to use arousal reappraisal at an early age than they are now? How might their ability to use arousal reappraisal change as they become older?

References

Jamieson, J. P., Mendes, W. B., Blackstock, E., & Schmader, T. (2010). Turning the knots in your stomach into bows: Reappraising arousal improves performance on the GRE. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46, 208–212.

Jamieson, J. P., Mendes, W. B., & Nock, M. (2013). Improving acute stress responses: The power of reappraisal. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22, 51–56.

Teaching Students About How Simple, Positive Activities Can Increase Well-Being

by David G. Myers

[Lyubomirsky, S., & Layous, K. \(2013\). How do simple positive activities increase well-being? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22, 57–62.](#)

For those of us who have engaged in the scientific pursuit of happiness, the question is familiar: *To what extent — and how — can people increase their happiness?*

As twin studies show, genes influence happiness. Moreover, genes also influence happiness-predictive traits, such as extraversion. But that’s not the whole story, note happiness researchers APS Fellow Sonja Lyubomirsky and Kristin Layous at the University of California, Riverside. Happiness is a malleable disposition. Much as our biologically influenced cholesterol level can be modified through diet and exercise, so also can happiness be tweaked with intentional actions.

Lyubomirsky, a leading positive psychologist, offers practical steps toward happiness in her engaging and science-smart guides: *The How of Happiness* and the just-published *The Myths of Happiness*. To become happier, she advises, live as happy people do — cultivate optimism, nurture supportive relationships, learn to forgive, strengthen your body with exercise and sleep, and become religiously or spiritually engaged.

All this is worth doing, note Lyubomirsky and Layous, because “happiness not only feels good, it is good. Happy people have more stable marriages, stronger immune systems, higher incomes, and more creative ideas than their less happy peers.”

And good news: positive activities — “simple, intentional, and regular practices meant to mimic the myriad healthy thoughts and behaviors associated with naturally happy people” — have repeatedly been shown to increase happiness. This is especially so under conditions that stimulate positive thoughts and

emotions.

This positive-activity-produces-positive-feelings principle coincides with other familiar psychological science principles:

Attitudes follow behavior: When we *act as if* we hold certain attitudes, we soon may.

The facial (and bodily) feedback effect: The “path to cheerfulness,” noted William James (1911), “is to sit up cheerfully, to look round cheerfully, and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there.” As experiments show, our expressions and postures don’t just display our feelings, they feed our feelings.

Cognitive behavior therapy: This method guides people to think, talk, and act in positive, depression-inconsistent ways, and to practice their new positive behavior as they approach everyday settings.

So, what positive activities might instructors attempt with students? Lyubomirsky and Layous offer *Observer* readers four simple and brief activities that have been shown to increase well-being. Ready-for-class instructions for these activities are available at www.psychologicalscience.org/teaching-well-being.

Five acts of kindness: “If you want to be happy, practice compassion,” said the Dalai Lama. Students receive instructions for performing five kind acts in a single day.

Gratitude letter: Invite students to recall someone from their past who “did something for you for which you are extremely grateful” and to spend 10 minutes writing a letter to this person.

Counting blessings: Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough (2003) report that students who keep a gratitude journal in which they record happenings for which they feel thankful, experience increased joy, decreased stress, and greater optimism. Lyubomirsky and Layous ask students to reflect on the past week and write down up to five things for which they are thankful.

Best possible self: Lyubomirsky and Layous bid students to imagine that “everything has gone as well as it possibly could” in their future academic life and to spend 10 minutes continuously writing about that ideal future. They also offer instructions for doing the same about one’s future social life, career, and/or health.

With promised confidentiality for their writing, students could be asked to report afterward on their reactions to the positive activity interventions. Does doing good foster feeling good? Do expressing gratitude and counting blessings increase one’s feeling fortunate? Does imagining one’s best possible self increase, at least temporarily, a more determined and optimistic outlook?

We can imagine additional positive activity interventions.

Practice daily micro gratitude. Attend to people’s helpful or kind acts — perhaps someone who serves your food, drives your bus, or cleans your classroom — and, for one week, make a point of thanking those people.

Volunteer. Help at the neighborhood soup kitchen. Become a big sister or brother. Befriend someone who is a homebound or a senior citizen.

Make comparisons that breed appreciation rather than envy. Expose yourself, imaginatively or in reality, to those who have less of whatever you desire, rather than those who have more.

If done as a lab project, students could respond, before and after the positive activity interventions, to scales assessing: *gratitude* (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2001; questionnaire at tinyurl.com/gratitudeQ) or *well-being*, such as the 20-item Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Watson, Clark, & Tellegan, 1988; questionnaire at tinyurl.com/PosNegAffect).

References

Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2003). Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 377–389.

James, W. (1911). *On vital reserves: The energies of men. The gospel of relaxation*. New York: Holt.

Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegan, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54, 1063–1070.