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# A Critical Reflective Analysis Of The Three Good Things Positive Intervention

Seligman, Steel, Park, and Peterson (2005) focused on positive psychological interventions that aim to increase happiness. A vital fact that has surfaced in the past few years is that happiness brings about many valuable effects in addition to feeling good (Seligman et al., 2005). Past research has suggested that positive interventions increase positive affect and improve wellbeing (Seear and Vella-Brodrick, 2009).

The three good things intervention is one such positive psychology intervention. Firstly, this essay will carry out a literature review analyzing the theoretical and empirical basis of the three good things intervention. Secondly, this essay will include a critical reflection based on my personal experience with the three good things intervention. Finally, this essay will provide a synopsis summarizing the key points of reflective analysis. The three good things exercise consists of participants writing down three things that went well on a daily basis, including their causes, during a given time period (Seligman, Rasheed, & Parks, 2006).

The three good things intervention can be linked to the PERMA model proposed by Seligman (2004). The five core elements known as positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment can be experienced through the three good things intervention. According to past research the three good things exercise leads to participants developing an optimistic mindset, whilst focusing on positive emotions such as gratitude (Killen & Macaskill, 2015).

Moreover, the depressive bias towards reflecting on the negative aspects of ones' day is counteracted (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). According to Weinstein (1989) optimistic people have a reduced risk of developing heart attacks when compared to pessimists. Also, lower levels of depression and anxiety are associated with more positive emotion (Seligman et al., 2006). Furthermore, according to Fredrickson and Johnson (2005) racial biases are reduced in people who consider themselves to be optimistic in life (positive relationships). In the study conducted by Seligman et al (2005) using 544 adults (42% males, 58% females), five happiness exercises (including the three good things exercise) were designed in addition to one placebo exercise. 64% of the adults were between the ages 35-54 years, and 77% of participants were white.

The placebo-controlled study included participants writing about an early experience. Since this review is focusing solely on analysing the three good things intervention, this report will provide the results from the three good things exercise. The three good things intervention had 140 (out of the 540) participants, equally controlled for gender. Depression was measured using the Centre for Epidemiological studies- Depression Scale (CESD) symptom survey. The Steen Happiness Index (SHI) was used to measure the upward changes in happiness on a weekly basis. The SHI consisted of 20 items requiring participants to select one statement from a group of statements that describes their present state.

Participants completed both these measures across a period of one week, and scores were compared at the end of the intervention. The results suggested that participants in both the

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control condition and three good things condition were happier and less depressed immediately after doing their exercise for one week. Participants in the three good things exercise showed increased levels of happiness and decreased levels of depression compared to the base-line one month after completing the exercise. Also, at the three-month and six-month follow-ups participants remained happier and less depressed.

On the other hand, participants in the control condition showed no difference compared to their baseline level of happiness and depression at the one-month, three-month, and six-month follow-ups. This implies that according to the results presented by Seligman et al (2005), the three good things exercise has lasting effects on happiness and depressive feelings. This can be linked to finding meaning in life in terms of the PERMA model. Mongraim and Anselmo-Matthews (2005) conducted a replication study of Seligman et al (2005). The design and measures of the study were identical to the experiment carried out by Seligman et al (2005) mentioned above. Participants were 1447 white individuals, with a majority of females (83%). 344 participants were recruited to the three good things condition. The results showed that happiness increased significantly during the first week and remained elevated at both the three-month and six-month follow-ups in the three good things condition. Thus, supporting the findings of Seligman et al (2005) in terms of the happiness index.

According to Rasheed (2009), this may be because remembering the positive aspects of ones' day may lead to individuals reflecting upon the causes behind what went well. This in turn will lead to people ending their day remembering what went well instead of what went wrong. These findings were further supported by Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Revich, and Linkins (2009) who carried out a positive psychology intervention in classrooms. However, Seligman et al (2009) combined the three good things exercise with the signature strengths exercise. The results depicted that students who engaged in this intervention showed more engagement and reported a higher level of enjoyment compared to the students who did not participate in the intervention. This can be linked to accomplishment and engagement in terms of the PERMA model.

On the contrary, in the findings of Mongraim and Anselmo-Matthews (2005) and Seligman et al (2009), the PPEs did not show a significant decrease in the levels of depression in participants in comparison to the participants in the control condition as in Seligman et al (2005). Perhaps the participants were slightly more depressed compared to the participants in the study of Seligman et al (2005). Furthermore, Seligman et al (2005) selected their participants via Seligman's self-help book known as 'authentic happiness', therefore these individuals may have had higher levels of motivation and stronger belief towards positive psychology exercises. Whereas the participants in the other two studies were recruited through a basic advertisement on the internet. Additionally, Seligman et al (2005) stated that an intervention period of one week may be insufficient to determine the success of this intervention.

This leads us to the study conducted by Gander, Proyer, Ruch, and Wyss (2012). Gander et al (2012) tested variants of the Seligman et al (2005) intervention. One such variation was extending the duration of the three good things intervention from one week to two weeks. The aim of this extension was to test if more of the same intervention had more or less beneficial effects. Participants were 73 white adults (19.3% males, 80.7% females). The control study consisted of participants engaging in this activity for only one week. The results indicated that participants who completed the intervention for two weeks did not benefit from the exercise compared to that of those who completed the exercise for one week. That is, participants in the two weeks condition did not show a significant increase in happiness and a significant decrease

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in depressive symptoms. Perhaps, the change in results may be due to the lack of optimal timing of the intervention. This may have led to participants becoming bored and feeling pressurized to complete the exercise, thereby negatively affecting the beneficial effects.

Moreover, feeling gratitude continuously may result in feelings of indebtedness, which may result in feelings of guilt and stress (Killen & Mcaskill, 2015). Killen and Macaskill (2015) investigated the effect of the three good things exercise in older adults. Participants were 88 healthy adults aged 60 or over, and the intervention was carried out for two weeks. The results indicated an increase in eudemonic wellbeing measured in terms of flourishing and a decrease in perceived stress. These findings were further supported by the work done by Rippstein-Leuenberger, Mauthner, Sexton, and Schwendimann (2017), who carried out the three good things intervention with healthcare workers for two weeks online. Resilience was measured both before and after the intervention. The results showed a significant increase in resilience in participants after the intervention was completed (Rippstein-Leuenberger et al., 2017).

According to the past research discussed above, it can be implied that this intervention can be extended to many age groups and professions. It is debatable if the results of the intervention will be the same in different cultural contexts as all the studies discussed above have been conducted with white individuals. Future research should also focus on carrying out the three good things intervention by controlling for personality factors. It will be useful to know how people with different personalities respond to documenting positive aspects of their daily life. Moreover, mindfulness helps the recall of memories (Seear & Vella-Brodrick, 2012). If experiences in-the-moment are recorded into awareness, then recalling that particular memory will be easier. Also, mindfulness increases positive emotions and responsiveness to daily activities. Therefore, combining the three good things exercise with a mindfulness exercise may bring about more beneficial outcomes.

### Implementing the Intervention

For my intervention, I selected the three good things intervention carried out by Seligman et al (2005) based on the empirical evidence discussed in my literature review above, regarding the success of this intervention. I personally selected the three good things intervention because I have always strived to be an optimist. However, despite my efforts to always look at things in a positive light, I have the tendency to focus on the negative side of life than is helpful. Therefore, it made me realize that taking a few minutes at the end of my day to write down something positive might contribute to my optimistic approach towards life.

Firstly, I invested in a diary that had a cover with a positive quote. I assumed that would be a good start. I allocated a set time each night to sit down at the end of my day and write three good things that I experienced on a daily basis for one week. Knowing that there might be a chance of forgetting this exercise at the end of each day, I included reminders on my phone for the entire duration of the intervention. I also included the causal factors to my positive experiences in order to identify how I can engage more in such activities to continue experiencing these positive emotions. Before I began my exercise on the first day I created my own measure of happiness inspired by the SHI. I did this in order to identify if there was a change in my levels of happiness at the end of this personal intervention.

Adhering to the plan in the first week was easy due to the anticipation and curiosity of the entire exercise. However, by the second week the exercise started felt a little monotonous and routine.

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Sitting and writing things down seemed to feel like a slightly tedious task. Despite the monotonous nature of the exercise, I was highly motivated to do this exercise for several reasons. Firstly, allocating a specific time for it made me feel like I was incorporating it into my daily routine. I wanted to complete it just as much as I aimed to complete my other tasks for the day. Moreover, speaking about it to my peers led to an implied social contract.

That is, the more I spoke about it the more I wanted to complete it. I was also starting to feel a sense of gratefulness towards the good things I experienced on a daily basis, that I usually took for granted. This led to me feeling many positive emotions such as joy, contentment, hope, and pride. But most of all it made me feel good about myself. Which in turn led to my continuous motivation to feel these emotions repeatedly. At the end of the intervention my happiness levels had increased in comparison to the first SHI I had completed. In addition to the questionnaire, I was also starting to feel better both mentally and physically. Perhaps this was because I gradually started to realize that I had a lot to be grateful for. Therefore, I believe the intervention was successful in my case.

Despite the success of my intervention, there are several factors that need to be discussed in order to extend this intervention to other participants. Firstly, this intervention may have been successful in my case because I am naturally an optimistic person. However, this might not be the same for people with different personalities. For example, a neurotic person may not find this exercise appealing or particularly useful. Secondly, the intervention may seem monotonous to some individuals. It might be more interactive if it is combined with another positive intervention exercise such as the 'best possible self' exercise.

A part of me was skeptical about how effective this would be to someone who is naturally optimistic in life. I realized that I was also consciously analyzing every encounter I had immediately after they took place, to comprehend if it was a good or a bad experience. As the days passed on, specifically from day 3, I realized that I was not paying as much attention to every single encounter or experience I had. I would only think about it specifically when my alarm would go off and when I would sit down to write about my three good things. I found it surprisingly challenging to link the causal factors to my three good things. I also found myself flipping through the pages to compare my different positive experiences from my previous entries. As the days passed by, I found myself looking forward to my time allocated to writing down my three good things. With the progress of the intervention I realized that I was learning to appreciate even comparatively smaller experiences and events. For example, on day 1 my entries consisted of the following; 1. Had lunch with my brother 2. Received an H1 grade for my mid-semester exam. 3. Had a successful workout session at the gym.

The causes for my good things consisted of pre-planning a meet up with my brother, early preparation for my exam, and motivation to stay fit respectively. The entries for day 7 seemed relatively simple compared to that of day 1. For instance; 1. Good weather. 2. The tram driver said good morning. 3. Phone call to my mom. However, it was more challenging to link the causal relationships behind these three good things compared to the entries from early on in the intervention. This may be due to the fact that I was starting to enjoy the simple things in life that did not need concrete explanations. At the end of the intervention I compared the SHI responses at the beginning and end of the intervention. Majority of my responses after the intervention seemed to be positive in comparison to my initial responses. Despite my positive emotions immediately after my intervention, it is debatable if I will continue to feel this way in the case of monthly follow-ups. I personally feel like I will have to continue this exercise in order to

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feel this way as the after effects of writing down three good things may not be as strong as the immediate effects.

In conclusion, taking into consideration both the literature review and my personal experience, it can be suggested that the three good things intervention can be applied to people in various age groups and professions. It is impossible for anyone to be continuously happy, therefore it is unrealistic to aim to develop an intervention that strives to achieve this. However, with interventions such as the three good things, we can aim to increase happiness and wellbeing even in the slightest way by training the mind to think positively. It is important to understand that striving to experience positive emotions does not imply that negative emotions should be neglected. It is more a reeducation of memory and attention to the positive aspects in life.

Likewise, it will be favourable to combine more than one positive exercise per person into an intervention such as the signature strengths exercise and the three good things exercise. This will combat the issues in relevance to the monotonous nature of the intervention. It will also help people to use their strengths in order to overcome their weaknesses. Further research in terms of personality, optimum timing for the intervention, and cultural factors are needed to advance such interventions. Longitudinal studies will also be beneficial to determine the long-term effects of the three good things intervention. If a positive intervention is built with all these factors taken into consideration, we may be able to witness more successful frameworks in the future.

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