

## Emotional balance

### What is emotional balance?

Emotions are how we genuinely feel about things. We all experience both pleasant and unpleasant feelings in our lives. Emotional balance is about getting the balance of pleasant and unpleasant feelings right. When we get the balance right, we can flourish – this means feeling happy, getting the most out of our lives and giving the best that we can give.

There is no duty we so much underrate as the duty of being happy.  
By being happy we sow anonymous benefits upon the world.

Robert Louis Stevenson

### Positive emotions

According to research, the ten most common positive emotions, or pleasant feelings, are: amusement, awe, gratitude, hope, inspiration, interest, joy, love, pride and serenity. Below are some definitions of these emotions:

Amusement	Laughing or smiling at something unusual that is not serious, dangerous or threatening.
Awe	A feeling of being transfixed and overwhelmed by greatness or goodness on a grand scale, whether it is by nature or humanity, compelling us to see ourselves as part of something greater than ourselves.
Gratitude	The heartfelt appreciation of something in our lives, like someone who has helped us or having a comfortable place to rest.
Hope	A belief that things will change and get better.
Inspiration	A feeling of being riveted by human nature at its best and wanting to express yourself at your best because of it.
Interest	A feeling of being fascinated or challenged by something new.
Joy	A feeling of playfulness and delight in things or people.
Pride	A feeling of taking credit for an achievement that is valued by others.
Serenity	An afterglow feeling of inner calm and contentment when things are going well for you.
Love	A feeling encompassing all or most of the above positive emotions within the context of a safe, often close relationship.

Fredrickson, B.L. (2009). Positivity. New York: Crown Publishers.

Look at each of these ten positive emotions in turn and think about what things in life bring out these feelings in *you*. Everybody experiences pleasant feelings for different reasons. So we can't tell you what things make you joyful or serene or interested, etc. Only *you* will know.

It is easy to think that positive emotions just happen to us as a result of creating or getting what we want in our lives. But they are *not* just the icing on the cake of a great life. Positive emotions can help us *create* our 'best life'! This is because they help to open our minds, build up our personal resources and undo the negative effects of stress.

### More information

Barbara Fredrickson and her colleagues have carried out a large number of laboratory studies on positive emotions. Their findings suggest that:

#### **Positive emotions broaden your mind**

When people were stimulated to experience positive emotions, as opposed to negative or neutral emotions, their minds opened up: their peripheral vision expanded so they could actually see more than they usually do. They also had more ideas and came up with better solutions to problems, they had a greater sense of 'oneness' with other people (they thought 'we' instead of 'me') and were more likely to reach out to help others.

#### **Positive emotions help you build your best future**

Over time, people who were encouraged to notice and develop their positive emotions showed an increase in psychological strengths such as optimism, acceptance of self and sense of purpose. Also, they showed an increase in good mental habits such as mindfulness and problem-solving. Their relationships also got stronger and aspects of their physical health improved.

#### **Positive emotions help you bounce back from life's challenges**

When put into stressful situations, people who were encouraged to experience positive emotions returned to normal heart rate and blood pressure more quickly than those who were encouraged to experience neutral or negative emotions. This suggests that focusing on positive emotions during difficult times can help us recover more quickly.

Fredrickson, B. (2009) Positivity. Crown Publishers. New York.

So it is really worth concentrating on feeling these emotions as much as we can.

Positive emotions are much more than a response to a physical sensation. Although they can arise from physical pleasure (e.g. good food, warm baths, watching a sunset, etc.) they also have a longer term effect on our wellbeing. The wonderful thing that research is telling us is that these positive emotions don't just feel good now - they can help us have brighter, better futures.

Positivity is a means toward better ends, not simply an end in itself.

Barbara Fredrickson

### Honest emotions

This is important! Positive emotions are no use to us if they are not honest and real. In fact, research suggests that insincere positive emotions can cause as much stress to our bodies as anger. Forcing yourself to smile or 'put on a happy face' may help you feel genuinely cheerful, which is fine. But if it's just done to pretend to others that you're happy when you're not, it won't have a positive effect on your wellbeing.

## Negative emotions

Negative emotions include anger, contempt, disgust, embarrassment, fear, frustration, guilt, sadness, shame and stress. Below are some commonly used definitions of these emotions.

Anger	A feeling of displeasure, hostility or antagonism towards someone or something.
Contempt	A feeling of disrespect for a person or thing.
Disgust	A feeling of repulsion.
Embarrassment	A feeling of shame when your inadequacy or guilt is made public.
Fear	A feeling of anxiety or apprehension about a possible or probable situation or event.
Frustration	A feeling of annoyance at being hindered or criticised.
Guilt	A feeling of remorse caused by feeling responsible for some offence.
Sadness	A feeling of disadvantage, loss and helplessness.
Shame	A feeling resulting from an awareness of inadequacy or guilt.
Stress	A feeling of strain when demand is greater than your capacity.

At times, negative emotions are appropriate and useful. It is only right that we should feel sad if someone we love dies. Feelings of anger can help give us the energy we need to stand up for fairness or justice. And fear helps to keep us away from things that could harm us.

However, some negative emotions are not helpful or healthy and we should try to reduce them. For example, we can spend too long beating ourselves up for a minor mistake we made or dwelling on a negative comment someone made about us.

Too many negative emotions can drag us into a downward spiral of despair, which can lead to a lack of energy and an inability to get the most out of our lives. If this goes too far, it can lead to depression and other mental health problems. We can learn to manage negative emotions so that they don't overwhelm us.

Concern should drive us into action and not into a depression.

Karen Horney

## Getting the balance right

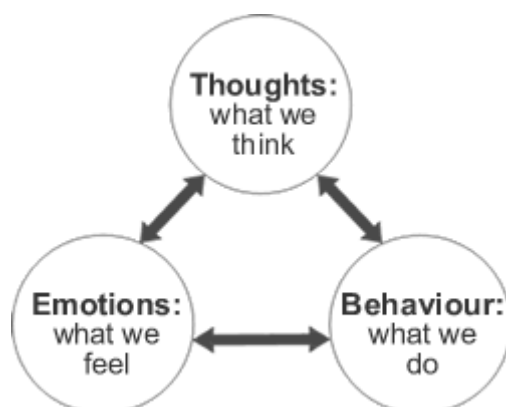
So how do we find emotional balance in our lives? How do we maintain a healthy balance of positive and negative emotions? Research suggests that negative emotions have a stronger effect on how we feel than positive emotions. So in order to flourish, we need at least the effect of three positive emotions to counterbalance the strong effect of just one negative emotion.

Research shows that the vast majority of people have a ratio of about 2:1 positive to negative emotions in their lives. It may take some effort to bring more positive emotion into your life,

but the effort will be worthwhile. Once you reach the 3:1 ratio, the evidence suggests that you should be more likely to flourish. There is an 'upward spiralling' effect because positive emotions make you healthier and more successful which will, in turn, increase your positive emotions, and so on...

## The importance of our thoughts

Positive and negative emotions don't just happen to us - they are affected by the way we think. In turn, how we think affects what we do. So, our behaviour is affected by our thoughts and emotions. In addition, the way we behave, and the outcomes of our behaviour, affects how we think and feel. There is therefore an ongoing relationship between our thoughts, feelings and behaviour - see diagram below:



So, we can take control of our emotions by changing the way we think. We can decide how we are going to respond when bad things happen to us. And we can think positively about our lives to help encourage positive emotion.

We can push negative thoughts out of our mind, by doing something to try and take our mind off them for a while, like going for a walk or a swim or phoning a friend. The physical exercise or contact with a friend can also give us a little boost of positive emotion which opens our minds to possible solutions to our problems. Also, solutions to our problems often come to us when we're not thinking too hard about it.

We can also argue with our negative thoughts by clearly examining the facts of the situation. Thinking things like "I'll never get this work finished - I'm just hopeless at this" makes you feel pretty low, but may not actually be true.

We can't just magic up positive emotions - for example, we can't just decide to be joyful. But we can decide to think about the good things in our life to help us experience joy by asking ourselves questions like, "What's going well in my life today?"

By celebrating what's right, we find the energy to fix what is wrong.

Dewitt Jones

## Did you know?



Photographers for The National Geographic magazine create stunningly beautiful photographs of all corners of the world. Their aim is to find the beauty in seemingly ordinary, even distressing, places by persistently asking themselves questions like "What's right here?" or "What can I celebrate?", and focusing on these things for their photographs.

So how we think is vitally important. Our minds are easily filled with worries and 'to do' lists. Our thoughts may be crowded with news and all the things going on around us. It takes effort to clear our minds and re-fill them with thoughts about our love for others or our dreams or the wonder of nature. But that effort is worth it if we want to create our best possible lives.

## Children's emotional balance

As they grow up, children develop their understanding of emotions and the way they respond to them. They need to learn how to manage negative emotions appropriately. So for instance, it is better that they recognise they are angry or scared and learn to deal with the emotion appropriately rather than hit out in anger or run away in fear.

They also need to recognise positive emotions and learn how to build on the positive emotions in their lives. Having fun should not be taken lightly – it's really good for them!

As adults who care for or work with children, you can help children learn to notice, understand and manage their feelings. You can also help them get the right balance of positive to negative emotions. This will help them get the best out of their lives.

## How emotions develop

The first emotions that can be recognised in babies include joy, anger, sadness and fear. Later, as children begin to develop a sense of self, they will develop more complex emotions like shyness, surprise, embarrassment, pride and shame. Very young children's emotions are mainly made up of physical reactions (e.g. heart racing, butterflies in stomach) and they will act out how they feel, for example they may throw a tantrum.

As they grow, their thoughts begin to have a greater influence on their emotions, for example they know they *feel* nervous because they are *thinking* about a school test. They develop the ability to recognise and name their feelings and are increasingly able to manage their emotions by rethinking their goals, for example, they may realise there is no point in feeling angry about something they can't change. As they grow, they also become more aware of other people's feelings, for example they may imagine that someone else will feel sad if their pet has died, even if they don't see them crying.

## How to help children get the right emotional balance

### Managing negative emotions

- Children learn about emotions and how to express them appropriately by watching others. Show children that you have feelings and that you are able to say how you feel and manage them appropriately. For example, you could say that you are angry about a child's behaviour and calmly talk about what the consequences would be, instead of

just shouting at them. Or you could say you are sad about something that's happened and talk about why it was so important to you, instead of becoming moody and uncommunicative.

- Help young children to name negative feelings – sadness, disappointment, frustration, etc. Learning to name feelings helps children to express them without having to act them out. For example, they could say that they are feeling disappointed that their friend can't come to play, instead of sulking.
- Talk and genuinely listen to children about how they are feeling. Try to see things from their point of view and accept how they feel. For example, you might say "You seem really disappointed that you didn't make the football team. I understand that it must be hard for you."
- Don't try to fix a problem for children or ignore how they are feeling. You could say things like "You look worried, is something bothering you?" and then take the time to listen.
- When children feel genuinely understood it is easier for them to learn to think through their feelings and work out effective ways of dealing with them. For example, if a child is feeling frustrated about trying to learn something new and sees that you understand their frustration, they may be more confident to keep practising, instead of getting into a bad mood.
- Acknowledge children's efforts to manage their feelings. This helps motivate them to use these helpful strategies in other situations. You might say something like "You were very brave to do that when you felt so scared" or "Well done for being so patient with your brother – I know you were angry with him."
- Be supportive, but set limits, when you are helping children to manage their feelings. So acknowledge their feelings but make it clear when they are behaving inappropriately. For example, you might say "I know you're upset that we can't go swimming but that does not make it ok to yell at me."
- Help children to learn to distract themselves when something is really bothering them. For example you could suggest to a young child that you read a story with them if they're frustrated and angry about waiting for something they want. Or you could suggest a short walk in the fresh air to an older child. Or you could put an upbeat song on your music player to help diffuse a bad temper.
- Don't dismiss children's emotions, e.g. "Don't be scared" or even worse, shame them for their feelings, e.g. "Don't be a scaredy-cat." This can lead them to believe that negative emotions are wrong.
- Acknowledge and respect a child's emotions first, then you may be able to talk it through and help them find facts which will help them argue with their negative thoughts. For example, if they are scared of going away from home for a few days, say something like "It's ok to be scared. Now let's think of the last time you went away from home and how well you coped."
- Don't lie to children about situations to avoid negative emotional reactions. For example, saying that an injection "won't hurt a bit" when you know it will hurt, can actually increase the negative emotion when it does hurt and can teach the child not to trust the person who has lied.

## Encouraging positive emotions

- Be a good role model for positive emotions. Show children that you can appreciate the things around you and enjoy the good things in your life. Show them that you can smile and engage with the people around you and be kind to yourself and to others. Find the things that you are interested in and the things that bring you joy, and build them into your life as much as you can.
- All children are different. Allow children to be themselves, to explore their world and their place in it. Give them freedom and opportunities to find the things that truly inspire them and bring them joy. Try not to impose your expectations by saying what you think they should enjoy or what activities are 'good' for them.
- Teach children that being kind to others will not only help the other person and make the other person feel good, but it will make them feel good too. Get them to think about ways they can be kind to others – at home, at school and in their community.

*A laugh, to be joyous, must flow from a joyous heart, for  
without kindness, there can be no true joy.*

Thomas Carlyle

- Try to get children smiling before you try to teach them something new or do something challenging. There are lots of ways of doing this (e.g. playing a silly game or watching a short funny film) - you will know what suits your child or group of children best. The positive feelings they gain from the fun activity should open their minds and help them be more creative and better at problem-solving, making them more responsive to the new or challenging task.
- Encourage children to ask themselves positive questions like "What have I got to be happy about today?" or "What went well today?" or "What made me feel proud of myself today?" You can do this by making it a mealtime routine or something that you do at the end of a classroom day or group activity.
- Help children to relive positive experiences, perhaps by drawing a picture of a pleasant memory or by looking at photos with them.
- Help children to develop serenity by allowing them space and quiet time for themselves to reflect, be calm and at peace.
- Help children to develop gratitude by talking to them about all the things they have in their lives, e.g. food, books, beaches, parks, clothes, friends, school, mobile phones, toys, computers, trees, animals, etc.
- Inspire children by taking them to events where they will see excellence in their area of interest, for example, a concert, play, dance show, sports event or art exhibition. Or encourage them to watch TV documentaries showing inspiring human behaviour.
- Once you have found the things that truly make a child feel good, find time to fit them into the child's life as much as possible and encourage them to savour their good feelings. Having positive emotions will help them become creative in other aspects of their lives and it will help them build resources so that they can bounce back when times are hard.

## Activities

Here are some activities to help children and young people think about their feelings and emotions:

### Happy Jelly Babies



What makes you feel happy? What makes the other people in your family or group feel happy? What will happen when you find out how to make each other smile?

What you need:

- A pack of assorted jelly babies – each person in your family or group will need three babies of the same colour (i.e. Jane – 3 green babies; Tom - 3 red babies; Kate - 3 yellow babies; Zak – 3 orange babies, etc.)
- A large plate
- Lots of little dishes or saucers
- A pack of mini sticky notes
- Marker pens.

How to set up the activity:

- Pour all the jelly babies onto a large plate.
- Arrange the little dishes around the large plate.
- Write the following sentences on sticky notes and stick each note onto a different dish:
  - I smile when someone does or says something funny.
  - I smile when I read or hear a funny story, or see a cartoon, or TV comedy.
  - I smile when someone does something kind for me.
  - I smile when I know I have done something really well.
  - I smile when life feels good.
  - I smile when I see something beautiful.
  - I smile when I'm with people who love me.
  - Something else makes me smile.

What you do:

- Starting with the youngest person, let each person choose a different coloured jelly baby and then give them two more jelly babies of the same colour.
- Read the different sticky labels out loud, so that everyone knows what the choices are.
- Think about the three things that make you smile the most.
- Put each of your jelly babies into a different dish to show which things make you smile the most.
- Look and see where all the jelly babies are, and then talk about the following questions.

Some things to talk about together:

- Where are most of the jelly babies? Are they bunched together in two or three dishes, or are they spread around?
- Which dish has the least jelly babies, or maybe no jelly babies? Why do you think no one put their jelly babies in that dish?
- Ask each person why they chose to put their jelly babies in the different dishes. If any babies were in the 'Something else makes me smile' dish, find out more about the 'something else'.
- What have you learned about each other that you didn't know before? How can you help the other people in your family or group to smile more often?
- After each person has explained what makes them smile, have fun eating the jelly babies...gently of course! Maybe you could try sucking the babies until they



dissolve (instead of chewing them viciously!) and see whose jelly babies last the longest!

Other ideas:

- Perhaps you could keep a jar of jelly babies and eat them to celebrate 'smiley moments' – the times when one person does something to make another person happy!
- Instead of using jelly babies and dishes use a sheet of paper divided into eight labelled sections and give each person three different-coloured, smiley-face stickers.
- Use coloured sweets instead of jelly babies.

## Story Bags



Do you have some little things that remind you of special events? Perhaps a shell reminds you of a holiday by the sea, or an old ticket reminds you of a day out? Why not fill a bag with small objects to help you play a story game together?

What you need:

- A small cloth bag with a drawstring closure, like an old PE bag
- Lots of small objects such as stones, foreign coins, shells, toy cars, first aid plasters, birthday candles, plastic animals, etc.
- A timer.

What you do:

- Place all the small objects in the drawstring bag and call it a 'story bag'.
- Explain to your family or group that there are lots of objects in the story bag that might remind them of their own special stories.
- Pass the story bag around the circle.
- When it's your turn, take something out of the bag - without peeping!
- Then set the timer for one minute and tell a story that happened to you. It must somehow include the object that you've just taken out of the bag.
- Place the object back in the bag when you've finished telling your story and then pass the bag to the next person.
- You can set a time limit on the activity, or you can pass the bag around the circle as many times as you like.

Some things to talk about:

- Which item reminded you of a really funny memory?
- Which items were the hardest to include in your stories?
- Which item in the bag did you like the best?
- If you could only keep three memories, which ones would you choose?
- If you had to leave your house with only one bag, what three small things would you take with you to remind you of your favourite memories?

Other ideas:

- Keep the story bag and use the activity during class group discussion, in the car or during special family celebrations.
- Find little objects in jumble sales or charity shops to add to your story bag so that there are always different things to be found and new stories to be told.
- If it's hard to find the objects you want, use picture cards from games you don't play anymore, and add them to the bag.