

# 3

## Happiness & Subjective Well-being exercises

- SCIENCE-BASED
- FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS

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# Welcome

It is a great pleasure to offer you this compilation of exercises on happiness and subjective well-being. During the past years, Positive Psychology has gained an increasing amount of attention, both from helping professionals and researchers. This attention has resulted in many valuable insights in what contributes to a happy, fulfilling life. In addition, positive psychology has given us many tools not only to flourish, but also to cope with difficult times in life.

Since 2013, our aim with PositivePsychology.com has been to contribute to this field by disseminating the science to psychology practitioners and educators alike.

We hope that the tools presented here may inspire you too to increase your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of the people around you. Please feel free to print and share this document with others.

For those who like what they see, make sure to also check out our online searchable database with all kinds of practical positive psychology tools:

<https://positivepsychology.com/toolkit/>

All the best,

Seph Fontane Pennock  
Hugo Alberts, Ph.D.



## Getting off the Hedonic Treadmill

### Happiness

Exercise

10 min

Client

No



### Goal

The goal of the exercise is to make clients aware of the well-known happiness inhibiting process: hedonic adaptation. In addition, this exercise requires participants to think of ways to prevent hedonic adaptation in the future by focusing on changes that are likely to result in long-lasting increases in happiness.



### Advice

- This exercise is for all clients, particularly those who focus on the accumulation of more items, such as more money, bigger homes, and so on. One way to introduce the idea of the hedonic treadmill is by identifying those things that provided only a brief boost and had short-lived effects, although clients assumed that they would make them happier in the long run. Then, it is important to identify and encourage activities or items that are likely to contribute to increased happiness over a longer period. It is essential to understand that some items, such as more money, can make people happier if those items are used to do the activities that make people happier. For example, if an increase in wealth gives people the freedom to spend more time with loved ones, help or give to others, reduce the number of sources of stress around them, or support artistic or scientific pursuits, then that happiness is more likely to last for longer periods.
- This exercise also works very well in groups. It can be used to explain the concept of hedonic adaptation and related constructs, like intentional activity, circumstance change, and circumstantial change (see Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). When used in groups, it can be informative to ask participants to share their most and least beneficial items in terms of sustainable happiness and look for similarities between these items.



## References

Gilbert, D. (2006). *Stumbling on happiness*. Vintage.

Sheldon, K. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2006). Achieving sustainable gains in happiness: Change your actions, not your circumstances. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 7, 55-86.



# Getting off the Hedonic Treadmill

## Instructions

See the table on the next page.

1. In the first column, list events, circumstances, or possessions that you believe have contributed to your happiness in the last year.
2. Using the events, circumstances, and possessions that you listed in step one, think about how long this new situation increased your happiness. Write the amount of time in the column titled "Duration."
3. Select items in the "Duration" column that contributed to your happiness for over three months by putting an "X" in the ">3 months" column.
4. For those items which resulted in an increase in happiness for over three months, in the column titled "Specifics," write down what specifically lead to the elevated level of happiness.

See the table below for an example:

Events, circumstances, or possessions	Duration (months)	>3 months	Specifics
new car	1		
joined sports club	12	X	Joined a new sports team. Nice people, looking forward to meeting them every week.
bought a new book	1		

Now take action.


5. Look back at the "Events, circumstances or possessions" and "Duration" columns and notice which situations increased happiness for one month or less. Using this information, think about ways in which you can adjust your life to focus more on those items that break you free of the "Hedonic Treadmill." Using the space below the table on the next page, list several ways you will change your life in the next month to focus more on items that provided increased happiness for longer periods (more than 2 months or the >3 months column). Be sure to keep your plans simple and "doable."



Events, circumstances, or possessions	Duration (months)	>3 months	Specifics

I am getting off the “Hedonic Treadmill” by focusing on items that provided longer periods of increased happiness by doing this:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

 Happiness Exercise 10-15 min Client No

## Time Capsule

While many believe that the route to happiness is through extraordinary experiences, happy life includes both the exceptional and the ordinary [1]. Seemingly unremarkable experiences make up the fabric of daily life, and people seldom realize the happiness they can bring in the future.

Affective forecasting is the process of predicting future emotions [2], and because people rely on their current state to anticipate future affective responses, it tends to be relatively ineffective and inaccurate [2,3]. Affective forecasting inaccuracies can cause people to underestimate the value of rediscovering ordinary experiences in the future. In short, we assume that today's mundane details will remain mundane in the future [4]. In reality, memories are imperfect and become distorted over time, which can make rediscovering ordinary experiences more enjoyable than anticipated [4,5].

For example, those who walk the same route to work every day might consider it a mundane part of their daily routine. After moving to a new city and returning for a visit, they assume this walk will be as boring as they remember. However, they experience nostalgia and realize that this seemingly mundane routine is more enjoyable than initially anticipated.

It is easy to overlook ordinary events because we underestimate the pleasure of reliving them and overestimate our ability to remember them [4]. One way to overcome this is to create a time capsule of seemingly mundane experiences to revisit in the future. By documenting and revisiting ordinary events, they can become more interesting, meaningful, and enjoyable and present opportunities for our future selves to increase happiness [4]. In this exercise, clients will create a time capsule of everyday experiences that they can revisit after three months as a source of joy and pleasure that will boost happiness in the future.



### Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



### Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients create a time capsule so they can rediscover the joy and unexpected benefits of ordinary, everyday experiences. By doing so, clients will have a record of day-to-day experiences that they can revisit to boost happiness in the future.





## Advice

- Clients can use a notebook, scrapbook, pen, and paper or store their time capsule digitally - the choice is entirely up to them. Completed time capsules must be stored out of sight, and clients should set a reminder on their phone or calendar, for example, to revisit it in three months. Ensure ample time (at least 30 minutes) to create and revisit time capsules.
- Clients are not expected to document every ordinary experience they have. Rather, they should try to capture snapshots and slivers of normal, everyday life. Over-documentation and including every little detail are likely to be overwhelming and affect the effectiveness of this exercise.
- Clients should be encouraged to capture various experiences and include sensory details when describing their small, everyday moments. For example, include the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes present during the experience.



## References

1. Bhattacharjee, A., & Mogilner, C. (2014). Happiness from ordinary and extraordinary experiences. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 41, 1-17.
2. Wilson, T. D., & Gilbert, D. T. (2005). Affective forecasting knowing what to want. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14, 131-134.
3. Gilbert, D. T., Gill, M. J., & Wilson, T. D. (2002). The future is now: Temporal correction in affective forecasting. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 88, 430-444.
4. Zhang, T., Kim, T., Brooks, A. W., Gino, F., & Norton, M. (2014). A "present" for the future: The unexpected value of rediscovery. *Psychological Science*, 25, 1851-1860.
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## Time Capsule

While you might assume that only extraordinary life events and milestones - like births, weddings, and other big achievements - bring happiness, looking back on seemingly mundane experiences can be a great source of joy. It is easy to go through life without really noticing or appreciating the everyday experiences that make up the fabric of life. Instead, we seek out extraordinary experiences in the pursuit of happiness because we assume that the mundane will continue to be mundane in the future.

Everyday experiences, like visiting friends or family, conversing with coworkers, or listening to your favorite album, may seem unremarkable at the time, but looking back on them can be more enjoyable than you might expect. With this in mind, it makes sense to seek happiness in the common, ordinary experiences that we take for granted rather than wait for extraordinary life events.

In this exercise, you will create a time capsule of items that capture your everyday experiences. A time capsule is a fun and simple way to record day-to-day events so that you can appreciate their value and experience boosts of happiness as you look back on them in the future.

### Step 1: Create your time capsule

In this step, you will gather the contents of your time capsule. You can use whatever works best for you to store your items: a notebook, scrapbook, laptop, or shoebox, for example.

Below, you will find a list of items and experiences to include in your time capsule. This list is not exhaustive, so feel free to skip any that do not apply to you and include other experiences you think would make good additions to your time capsule.

- A description of the last social event you attended, including who was there, what you did, and how you felt.
- A description of a favorite meal or snack that you enjoyed recently.
- A description of a scenic view you saw on a walk or drive.
- A description of a recent conversation with a friend that you enjoyed or found meaningful.
- A quote or passage from a book you are reading.
- A description of how you met a new friend or acquaintance, including any fun details.
- The names of three songs you listened to recently.
- An inside joke that you shared with someone recently.
- A recent photo that captures a happy or meaningful moment.
- An excerpt from a recent project for school or work that you felt proud of.
- A description of something you learned recently.



### Step 2: Store your time capsule

Now that you have put together your chosen items and experiences, you will keep your time capsule unopened for three months. It is important to store your time capsule somewhere it will not be seen during this time, like a drawer, cabinet, or under your bed, for example.

No matter how tempting it might be, you should not look at your time capsule during this time.

When you have safely stored your time capsule, set a reminder on your phone, diary, or calendar as a prompt to revisit it in three months.

### Step 3: Revisit your time capsule

Now that three months have passed, you can open your time capsule and look at the contents. Please allow ample time to revisit your experiences and give it your full attention.

Remove each item, one at a time, and notice how you feel as you reflect on each experience. When you have spent some time revisiting the contents of your time capsule, consider the questions below and write your responses in the spaces provided.

After revisiting your time capsule:

1. How did it feel to look back on these ordinary experiences?

2. a) While revisiting your time capsule, what experience(s) brought you the most joy?



2. b) What was it about these specific experiences that made them so impactful?

3. a) What experiences did you forget about or not appreciate at the time?

3. b) How did it feel to rediscover these experiences?

4. What experiences do you now find particularly interesting or meaningful?



#### Step 4: Reflection

- How did it feel to focus on ordinary aspects of your life?
- What did you enjoy most about this exercise?
- How has your perspective on ordinary experiences changed?
- In what ways has this exercise helped you appreciate ordinary, everyday experiences?

## Happiness

Exercise

15 min

Client

No

## Magic Wand

Having a purpose in life reflects a long-term commitment to personally meaningful and impactful goals [1]. In short, although one's purpose is likely to evolve over time, the goals that nurture a sense of purpose are those that provide direction and meaning and have the potential to improve the lives of others.

A sense of purpose presents myriad benefits for both psychological and physical well-being. For instance, purposeful people are more optimistic, hopeful, resilient, and satisfied with life [2,4]. Furthermore, purpose fosters a greater sense of personal control [3], openness to diversity, increased life engagement, grit, adaptability to stressors, and enhanced positive connections [5]. Having a sense of purpose is also linked to lower rates of mild cognitive impairment, better markers of cardiovascular health, improved health behaviors, and even longevity [2,5].

Despite these benefits, discovering one's purpose in life remains challenging for many. Indeed, around two-thirds of young adults feel they lack a clear purpose in life [2]. Similarly, many older adults struggle to pinpoint their purpose as they navigate significant life changes like retirement or losing a spouse [5]. With this in mind, it seems clear that people should find ways to identify their purpose and cultivate a sharper sense of direction in life.

This exercise will help clients nurture a sense of purpose by exploring ways to contribute to a better world. By reflecting on things they would change to create their ideal world, clients can commit to meaningful actions that foster purpose and direction.



### Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



### Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients cultivate a sense of purpose by identifying ways they can contribute to creating a better world. By reflecting on what they would change to create their ideal world, clients can commit to meaningful actions that foster a sense of purpose and direction in their lives.



## Advice

- Rather than focusing on personal passions or dreams, this exercise is more concerned with cultivating purpose and meaning. As such, it is important that clients develop personally meaningful goals (step 4) aimed at improving the world around them (either locally or globally). This is crucial to cultivating genuine purpose and a sense of direction.
- It should be emphasized that purpose development is not going to happen overnight and is an ongoing process. Clients should understand that finding purpose in life requires effort and commitment.
- This exercise can also be used as an icebreaker and conversation starter in group settings.



## References

1. Damon, W., Menon, J., & Bronk, K. C. (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science, 7*, 119-128.
2. Bronk, K. C., Baumsteiger, R., Mangan, S., Riches, B., Dubon, V., Benavides, C., & Bono, G. (2019). Fostering purpose among young adults: Effective online interventions. *Journal of Character Education, 15*, 21-38.
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4. Bronk, K. C., Hill, P. L., Lapsley, D. K., Talib, T., & Finch, W. H. (2009). Purpose, hope, and life satisfaction in three age groups. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*, 500-510.
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## Magic Wand

A sense of purpose is about having meaningful goals that shape your choices and give you a clear direction in life. Without a sense of purpose, life can seem aimless and devoid of meaning.

Having a sense of purpose not only enriches your own life but can also positively impact the world around you. People with a defined purpose tend to be more hopeful, content, optimistic, and fulfilled. Living with purpose also helps you lead a more impactful life, through which you can contribute to the greater good and make the world a better place.

This exercise will help you develop a sense of purpose by thinking about how you can make the world a better place. By considering what you would change to create your ideal world, you can identify meaningful actions that give you purpose and direction in life.

### Step 1: Reflect on your world

To begin, take a moment to think about the world you live in, including your home, local community, and the world at large. As you do so, consider the things you would like to change.

For example, you might be concerned about specific issues in your local area like food poverty, or global issues like access to clean water and climate change. Perhaps you see piles of litter on your way to work or think your local area lacks resources for young people.

What would you like to be different in this world and why? Use the space below to write down your answer.





## Step 2: Imagine your ideal world

As you complete this step, allow yourself the freedom to be creative and let your imagination run wild.

Take a moment to imagine you have been given a magic wand that grants you the power to change *anything* about the world. You can construct your ideal world by solving all problems and amplifying the things you appreciate in your home, local community, and the world.

Describe your ideal world in the space below.

What would need to change to move closer to this ideal world?



### Step 3: Identify your role

In this step, you will think about your role in creating your ideal world. Take a moment to reflect on the changes outlined in the previous step and consider the skills, strengths, and resources you possess that could contribute to making those changes a reality.

Consider the following questions and write your responses in the spaces provided.

1. What can you do to make the world look more like this ideal version?

2. What skills and resources will help you do this?



#### Step 4: Take action

Now that you have identified what you would like to change about the world, you will create a goal that is in line with your preferences. Once you have set a goal for yourself, you can take action and start making a positive change in the world.

1. Considering your responses in the previous steps, what initial goal will you set for yourself?

*\*\*Please note that this goal should be achievable and have the potential to make a difference to the people around you, your local community, or the world at large. For example, a goal of ending world hunger is unrealistic whereas a goal of donating to (or volunteering at) a local food bank is both practical and impactful.\*\**

2. What steps will you take to achieve this goal?



3. What is your target date for achieving this goal?

When you have achieved your first goal, set yourself another and continue to contribute to the world in a positive way.

#### Step 5: Reflection

- What did you enjoy most about this exercise?
- Has this exercise changed how you think about your purpose in life? If so, how?
- What insights have you gained from completing this exercise?
- How will you use these insights in the future?