

Three Good Things

Gratitude

📌 Intervention

🕒 10 min. daily

👤 Practitioner

📄 Yes

The Three Good Things exercise, also known as “The Three Blessings,” is arguably one of the most well-known positive psychology interventions. This exercise entails writing down three things that went well and reflecting on these things at the end of each day (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). In a study by Seligman and colleagues (2005), participants were asked to write down three good things that happened to them each day, for one week. The results showed that this daily activity had a significant impact on reported levels of well-being and depression. Moreover, for participants who continued the exercise beyond the suggested 1 week, it was found that the activity increased happiness and decreased symptoms of depression for up to 6 months of follow-up.

*In another study, reported in Seligman’s book *Authentic happiness* (Seligman, 2002), even more profound effects were observed. In this study, severely depressed participants were instructed to recall and write down three good things that happened each day for 15 days. 94 percent of them went from severely depressed to mildly to moderately depressed during that time.*

Interestingly, exercises similar to that of “The 3 Good Things” have been used in clinical settings for quite some time.. Effective interventions for depression have often included positive activity “homework” for those with major depression (Lewinsohn & Graf, 1973). What is new is the Positive Psychology paradigm underlying these positive exercises: attention to the positive for the explicit purpose of increasing well-being and not as medicine for troubled states of mind.

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to boost well-being by practicing gratitude.

Advice

- It is important for clients to reflect on why each good thing happened. The rationale here is simply that people may not be especially mindful about good events, even when they count them. For most people, “competence requires no comment,” which means that we usually assume that good things are our due. Accordingly, we do not think much about them and miss the potential benefits of thoughtful (conscious) gratitude. Asking for an explanation leads to “deeper” thought. Moreover, often people are unaware of their own role in good fortune. For example, someone cannot make a beautiful sunset, but they can choose to take it in (or not).
- In his book “A primer on positive psychology”, Peterson states: “We experimented with these instructions and discovered—for example—that asking people to list ten good things did not work as well as asking for three and further that asking them to count their blessings at the beginning of the day was not nearly as effective as asking them to do so at the end of

the day” (Peterson, 2006, p.38). Thus, when using this exercise with clients, it is advisable to do this exercise in the evening and stick to no more than three good things.

- Some possible variations of this exercise:
 - Do this exercise each day with a partner. Spend some time to discuss your and the other person's three good things.
 - Make a jar and write the good things on a small piece of paper. Empty the jar at the end of the year and read all the notes. This is a nice variation for use with kids.
 - At work in a team setting one can ask the question: What three things went right with the project today? What did I/we (the team) client do to make those good things happen?
- As a precaution, you may invite clients not to list things cynically such as, “I was grateful to get through the day”, but to focus on things they did or that happened which were genuinely positive. For instance, instead of that cynical response, saying “I am grateful that I left work on time and got home in time to see my family.”
- It is important to make sure that clients do not use this exercise as a way to avoid or deny the negative things in life.
- Make sure clients understand this exercise is not only about “big” things. Drinking a cup a coffee, having a nice conversation, etc. are all good examples of things that one can be grateful for. For a depressed client, the good thing may be that he/she got out of bed.
- Sometimes clients interpret the exercise as a way to put things into perspective: “People in Africa are dying, I should be grateful for this mail”. Gratitude is not about (downward) comparison. Of course, things can always be worse, but this is not the essence of gratitude. It is possible to be grateful for something without making the comparison to people who are worse off.
- It is important that clients list specific rather than general things. For instance, it is better to list “being grateful for a nice conversation at work this day” than “being grateful for having a job”.
- Although clients may do this exercise in their head, it is advised to write down the good things rather than think about them.



Suggested Readings

Lewinsohn, P. M., & Graf, M. (1973). Pleasant activities and depression. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 41*, 261–268.

Peterson, C. (2006). *A primer in positive psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Seligman, M. E. (2004). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. Simon and Schuster.

Seligman, M. E., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist, 60*, 410.

Tool Description

Instructions

In this exercise, you will remember and list three positive things that have happened in your day and reflect on what caused them. In doing so, you will tune into the sources of goodness in your life. The hope is that you will remember events that otherwise would have been overlooked. It is a habit that can change the emotional tone of your life, increasing an overall sense of gratitude for your life.

Short version

Each night before you go to sleep:

1. Think of three good things that happened today.
2. Write them down.
3. Reflect on why they happened.

Extended version

Each day for at least one week, write down three things that went well for you that day. Also, provide an explanation for why they went well.

Preferably, create a physical record of your items by writing them down. The items can be relatively small in importance (“I had a nice chat with my friend”) or relatively large (e.g., “I earned a big promotion”).

After each positive event on your list, answer in your own words the question “Why did this good thing happen?” For example, you made the nice chat with your friend possible because you called her.

To make this exercise part of your daily routine, some find journaling before bed to be helpful. As you write, follow these instructions:

1. Give the event a title (e.g., “co-worker complimented my work on a project”)
2. Write down exactly what happened in as much detail as possible, including what you did or said and, if others were involved, what they did or said.
3. Include how this event made you feel at the time and how this event made you feel later (including now, as you remember it).
4. Explain what you think caused this event—why it came to pass. You may also focus on what you did to make this good thing happen.

Use whatever writing style you please, and do not worry about perfect grammar and spelling. Use as much detail as you would like.