

January is now here and many of us have anticipated the end of the past difficult year. We need to be more careful than ever with the virus that is plaguing us, but there is some hope now that there are approved vaccines coming. Hopefully there will be a smooth and timely distribution. While we wait, we are going to have to use our resilience to get us to healthier times.

Many people make New Year Resolutions on January 1st hoping to improve health, happiness or wealth in the coming year. So here we are in the middle of winter, social distancing and worried about the pandemic. Our routines and social networking have drastically changed. It is dark and cold outside. Most people can carry out resolutions for a few weeks or maybe a month or two and then fall back to previous habits. Perhaps, like me, you are reluctant to give up chocolate or screen time when we are staying at home and not seeing other people this month. Maybe this pandemic has helped us to be wiser about what we seek. Why not focus on well being and happiness. I have been studying Positive Psychology for a few years now, and I would like to share an amazing five minute habit that you only have to carry out for about 2 weeks to see a marked improvement in your happiness/mental health and sleep.

If you studied psychology in the early 70's-80's you most likely have heard of a psychologist named Martin Seligman who stumbled across a phenomenon called learned helplessness. Here is a link to explain learned helplessness if you would like to learn more <https://youtu.be/jEO3sJdoNV8> Seligman used his acclaim to shape psychologists' focus to studying positive psychology instead of focusing on pathology. Much research has now been done on mental health wellbeing. Happiness is not about being positive all the time or ignoring difficult situations and feelings. It is about having a sense of wellbeing, meaning and optimism about life. It appears that about 50% of our happiness level is determined by our genetic makeup. We each have a natural set point – some of us very high on the sunny disposition index, some of very low and most of us somewhere in between. Circumstances account for about 10% of our happiness. As it turns out, we adjust quickly to circumstances so, for example, if you got something you really wanted for Christmas, it probably raised your happiness in the moment, but by now, you are accustomed to it and it no longer raises your happiness level to have it. The good news is that about 40% of our happiness is based on our thoughts and the way we think about our circumstances. Having a social network, having

meaningful things to do, practicing gratitude all contribute to a higher sense of wellbeing.

Here is what I recommend you do this January as a resolution to improve your sense of wellbeing. Seligman calls it Three Good Things or the What Went Well & Why exercise. For 2 weeks, every single day, at the end of each day, write down 3 things that went well for you and why it went well. That's it. That's all you have to do.

What will happen is that your sleeping will improve; your sense of wellbeing will go up. If you do it for two weeks (as long as I usually keep my resolutions), the results will last for about 6 months. This has been documented in peer reviewed research. The effects are as powerful as Prozac for lifting depression. The exercise trains us to look for and remember the things going right in our lives. We have adapted to watch out for danger and remember pain in order to survive as a species, but with so much information now available to us and so many safety regulations, we just don't need to be as vigilant as we were twenty thousand years ago. It has come to a point that we need to reset our neurology to look for and remember the positive things in our lives and avoid needless bad news and ill-advised opinions.

For best results: Think of 3 good things that happened today: just little things like, "I remembered my mask before I got out of the car."

Write each one down and write a brief sentence stating why it went well like, "I am getting better at remembering what I need to stay safe."

Do it for 2 weeks preferably in the evening close to bedtime and if you like doing it, continue. If not, enjoy the effects for about six months and then repeat again in June. You cannot overdose on this strategy. Two weeks will give you results, but if you find you like doing it, that's okay just keep on going!

Cautions: No overachieving...pick small things that went well. Only 3 -no more. No need to pick the 3 best things that happened. Not the point. This is not a competition. Too much pressure. It is better to pick small good things like, "The cookies Elke gave me were delicious. I have thoughtful friends."

This is not a gratitude journal (another excellent mental health strategy by the way). You are looking for little things that have gone well and *how or why you*

made those things happen. You might be grateful that they went well *but* gratefulness is a disciplined life time practice like mindfulness. We will talk about those practices another time.

Do not try to make good things happen so you have something to write down and don't confuse good things with judgy things. This is not about oneupmanship or meeting someone else's (aka the advertising media's) ridiculous standards. Better today to say "I ate delicious cookies made by my friend –I have thoughtful friends" than "I managed to eat only kale and celery today - only 20 more weeks and I will be ten pounds lighter than that no good skinny Fran."

You get the idea...Here is a link to learn more about the What Went Well & Why exercise: https://youtu.be/hZ4aT_RVHCs