



How do positive psychology interventions work? A short-term placebo-controlled humor-based study on the role of the time focus[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The past years have seen a growing interest in the study of positive psychology interventions. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that they are effective in enhancing happiness and ameliorating depression. However, far less is known on why and how they work. We test two proposed working mechanisms: An attentional shift to the positive, and savoring positive emotions. The proposed mechanisms are tested by manipulating the time focus (past, present, or future) in the instruction of a one-week online humor-based positive intervention (three funny things). A sample of 695 adults was randomly assigned to one of the intervention condition or a placebo control condition. All three variants were effective in enhancing happiness and ameliorating depressive symptoms from pre- to post-intervention compared to the placebo control condition. As expected, the present variant was associated with both mechanisms, while the past variant was more strongly associated with the savoring mechanism, and the future variant more strongly with the attentional shift mechanism. This initial study provides first support for the potential working mechanisms of effective positive interventions.

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Positive psychology aims at studying what makes life most worth living (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). One of its applied areas is the study of strategies, intentional activities, and, more broadly speaking, ways of how people can boost their well-being. Over the past years, a broad range of positive psychology interventions (PPIs) has been developed. They aim at inducing positive emotions, cognitions or behaviors. Two recent meta-analyses suggest that they are effective in enhancing well-being and ameliorating depression (Bolier et al., 2013; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

Only comparatively few studies exist, which specifically address how and why PPIs work. The model by Lyubomirsky and Layous (2013) refers to positive emotions, thoughts, behaviors and need satisfaction as mediators and the person \times activity-fit as a moderator of the effectiveness (see e.g., Schueller, 2012; Senf & Liao, 2013). Thompson, Peura, and Gayton (2015) argue that this fit is higher if the intervention feels “natural” and if it is pursued because of intrinsic motivation. They

found a greater person-activity fit for women than men in a psychology undergraduate's sample across several PPIs. Proyer, Wellenzohn, Gander, and Ruch (2015) found that indicators of a person \times activity-fit robustly predict well-being and depression 3.5 years after completion of a PPI. Mainly the indicator “early reactivity” contributed to the prediction and it seems as if this initial phase is of crucial importance (see also Wellenzohn, Proyer, & Ruch, 2016). Therefore, this period might be best suited for observing working mechanisms.

Quoidbach, Mikolajczak, and Gross (2015) proposed a process model of emotion regulation as a framework for PPIs. They structure the variety of different PPIs using the emotion regulation-model by Gross (1998) and propose emotion regulation strategies as the theoretical background for possible working mechanisms. These are situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change and response modulation. They conclude that the strongest evidence exists for interventions using attentional deployment, followed by cognitive change, and response modulation (being effective in the short-term), while for situation selection and situation modification more research is needed. Furthermore, their model is structured by the time (before, during, or after the event) when the emotion regulation strategy is applied. The authors suggest that each proposed working mechanism (i.e., different emotion regulation strategies) can be used in all three periods, but its effectiveness varies depending on

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which strategy is used in which time frame. One might therefore argue that the focus of a PPI's instruction, aiming at the past, present, or future, is associated with different working mechanisms.

1. The time-perspective in positive psychology interventions and mechanisms

An inspection of the effectiveness of the nine tested PPIs in Gander, Proyer, Ruch, and Wyss's (2013) study and a review of comparable studies (e.g., Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012; Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2014; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), seems to suggest that interventions addressing the present or the future in the instruction (e.g., writing about good or funny things, or one's usage of strengths in daily life) were generally more effective in enhancing happiness. As a trend, this also seems true for ameliorating depressive symptoms. Those focusing on past situations or events (e.g., one door closes another one opens; Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006) seem to be less effective in comparison. This notion receives further support from a recent placebo-controlled study on humor-based PPIs (Wellenzohn et al., 2016). Interventions directed towards the past (e.g., collecting the funniest things that ever happened in one's life), were less effective than those focused on the present (e.g., noting three funny things that happened during the day, or counting funny things during the day). Hence, the hypothesis that the time perspective in the instruction of a PPI plays an important role in enhancing happiness and ameliorating depression by triggering specific working mechanisms is strengthened.

The field of positive psychotherapy provides a further perspective on potential working mechanisms. Seligman, Rashid, and Parks (2006) argue that conducting positive interventions could lead to a more positive attentional-focus. Sanchez, Vazquez, Gomez, and Joormann (2014) investigated a related concept in their work on the positive information-processing bias and its relation to positive mood. Research in the latter area suggests that participants who underwent a positive mood induction showed a mood-congruent reaction (e.g. spent more time looking at positive pictures the better their mood was). Hence, the positive mood induction triggered a shift in the participants' attention (i.e., a positive information-processing bias). Based on the existing literature, we hypothesize that PPIs are associated with a shift in the attention towards a more positive outlook, thereby, facilitating a positive information-processing bias. The attentional shift described in Quoidbach et al. (2015) could be seen as a cognitive change strategy, as it reflects how people perceive a given situation (e.g., appraising a situation as a special moment). Quoidbach et al. (2015) suggest that the effectiveness of the cognitive change strategy in increasing positive emotions in the short-term is strong in the present and future time focus, but modest for the past time focus (i.e., after the event). Therefore, we expect that PPIs focusing on the present and future might be especially effective by having more potential to influence the attention as a momentary construct, compared to interventions directed at the past.

At this point, it needs mentioning that in earlier studies those PPIs focusing on the past were also effective to a certain degree (e.g., Gander et al., 2013). Therefore, one might argue that other working mechanisms contribute to their effectiveness (e.g., re-experiencing perceived positive emotions). In line with Lyubomirsky and Layous (2013) and Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, and Conway (2009) we hypothesize that savoring positive emotions might also contribute to well-being, and furthermore function as the main trigger of increased well-being in interventions focusing on the past. Thus, in comparison with interventions focusing on the present and future, focusing on the past might induce more savoring of positive emotions at that very moment when one is consciously remembering the positive experience. This conscious remembering of the experience might induce positive emotions with a higher intensity than if positive emotions are savored in the very moment, due to the fact that one might be more easily detracted and not consciously focusing on the emotion. Embedded in

Quoidbach et al.'s model (2015), the savoring mechanism might be assigned to the situation selection strategies (e.g., looking at pictures from one's holiday trips), for which the evidence regarding its effectiveness in increasing positive emotions in short-term is rather weak. Overall, we expect that different working mechanisms are more likely to be triggered, depending on the time focus—the savoring mechanism by interventions focusing on the past and the shift in attention mechanism by interventions focusing on the future, while both mechanisms might be triggered by the present (i.e. the original version of the experimental-ly varied intervention of the study; see Fig. 1).

2. Aims of the present study and hypotheses

The aim of the present study is to experimentally vary the time-perspective in the instruction of one particular PPI, while the other parts of the instruction are not changed. This comparison allows for an initial estimation of the effects of this variation on the effectiveness of the interventions. Additionally, the proposed working mechanisms are assessed using a subjective rating. We use the three funny things intervention (Gander et al., 2013; Proyer et al., 2014; Wellenzohn et al., 2016) in its original version (i.e., present variant) as a starting point, and developed equivalent past and future variants.

We expect that all three variants are effective in enhancing well-being and ameliorating depressive symptoms after the intervention in comparison with a placebo control condition. Additionally, we expect the original intervention (focus on the present) to be associated with the numerically largest effects by triggering both proposed mechanisms. Furthermore, we expect participants in all three interventions to report a greater shift of attention to a positive focus compared to a placebo control condition (i.e., "early memories"; Seligman et al., 2005). However, we expect differences among the three conditions: The future variant will likely elicit a stronger shift towards a positive focus compared to the past variant, while the past variant likely induces more re-experiences of positive emotions – savoring – compared to the future variant.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A total of $N = 955$ adults registered on a research website and provided basic demographic information. Due to not meeting the inclusion criteria (i.e., older than 18 years, not undergoing psychotherapeutic or pharmacological treatment, and no use of illegal drugs, as proposed by the ethical committee) 29 were excluded (see Fig. 2).

Of the initial sample, 695 participants (14.2% men) completed the post-measures and conducted the intervention (30 reported that they did not conduct the intervention and 201 did not fill in the post-measures). Thus, the dropout-rate was 24.95%. The final sample with a mean age of 47.5 ($SD = 12.2$) was rather well educated with 39.6% having a university degree, 18.3% having a degree from an applied university, 19.3% having a diploma that allows them to attend university, and 19.3% having completed an apprenticeship, 3.5% having completed public school and one person not having completed public school (i.e., nine years of obligatory school education).

3.2. Instruments

The Authentic Happiness Inventory (AHI; Seligman et al., 2005; in the German version as used by Gander et al., 2013) assesses overall happiness in the past week. The AHI consists of 24 groups of five statements each (e.g., from 1 = "I have sorrow in my life" to 5 = "My life is filled with joy"). Internal consistency at pretest was $\alpha = .94$.

The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977; in the German Adaption by Hautzinger & Bailer, 1993) measures the frequency of depressive symptoms in the past week

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