



## Efficacy of positive psychology exercises in female college students

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### Abstract

Student life has become stress provoking due to increasing professional and social pressures. The authors observed a sense of disillusionment in students of psychology who felt overwhelmed with the bombardment of theoretical concepts from Euro-American psychology with little relevance to day to day lives. The present study was designed to foster self-awareness and self-enhancement in participants by using positive psychology exercises. One hundred and thirty female psychology undergraduate students from University of Delhi college used journal writing, gratitude exercise, gratitude letter and anonymous good deed for a period of six weeks spanning over two years in two batches. The exercises were supplemented by weekly group discussions to assess the progress and share their experiences with the facilitator. Theme based analysis was used to interpret the data. A model of change was also created through participant's inputs. They authentically experienced efficacy of positive psychology exercises in daily life. Though positive psychology exercises did not work for everyone uniformly and alternatives had to be suggested by the facilitator to catalyse the required change. Some of the students continued to use these exercises even after completion of the study.

**Keywords:** positive psychology exercises, self-awareness, self-enhancement

### Introduction

Young people are bombarded with innumerable stimuli from the external environment due to the smartphones, social media and influence of information and technology in their lives overall. The definition of environment is undergoing a sea change. A young person may have a party like situation of hundred people or more in the privacy of their bedrooms every night, thanks to social networking even in developing countries like India. In spite of innumerable comforts and facilitation in lives of young people, they are reporting lack of peace, wellbeing and coherence.

Inquiries in the 'good- life', the best in human behaviours and the highest levels of experiences have intrigued philosophers from times immemorial and have also long been the subject of attention for theorists and researchers in psychology. However, in the post-world war era, psychology as a science began to focus largely on negative aspects. In the last one decade or so, there has been a growing recognition of the long- ranging implications of such a negative bias in the field of psychological inquiry.

According to Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) [23]. "Positive psychology is the empirical study of how people thrive and flourish; it is the study of the ordinary human strengths and virtues that make life good". Positive psychology addresses the importance of positive internal experiences, positive individual characteristics, and institutions that enable people to flourish.

Self-awareness and self-enhancement are also considered to be prominent positive characteristics of human beings. It has been rightly said by Mufti James Hannush, "Self-awareness is not only a gift, but it is a responsibility." Self-awareness can be broadly defined as the extent to which people are consciously aware of their internal states and their relationships with others (Trapnell Reich, 1995) [29]. Self-

awareness refers to the capacity of becoming the object of one's own attention (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) [4]. More recently an extensive review has demonstrated that different aspects of self-awareness, including mindfulness and rumination, mediate the impact of mindfulness-based interventions on mental health outcomes (Gu, Strauss, Bond, & Cavanagh, 2015) [10]. The importance of self-awareness goes beyond well-being and mental health to include substantial impacts on day-to-day functioning. It has significant effects on performance, with meditation and mindfulness fostering engagement with tasks through performance-related stress and interpersonal problems related ruminations. (Feldman, 2014)

In positive psychology, a theory of objective self-awareness by Shelley Duval and Robert Wicklund (1972) [4], is associated with self-awareness. The theory tries to focus on situational cues that remind individuals of themselves which lead to attention focused on the self and away from the environment. The result is a self-aware person who are cable to compare her current self with ideal self. They proposed that self-awareness creates a negative emotional reaction. This negative affect then motivates the individual either (a) to regulate his or her behaviour with respect to the standard in an effort to reduce the discrepancy, or (b) to avoid the self-aware state.

It has been rightly said that self enhancement is the food for thought. Self-enhancement aims at boosting beliefs that one is lovable and capable. Acknowledging ones abilities and capabilities and declaring them to the world refers to self-enhancement. Positive self-image on the other hand is presenting oneself in positive light irrespective of what one believes in. (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009) [2].

There are five pillars of self-enhancement motivation. Hepper *et al.* (2010) gleaned such instantiations, these were positivity embracement, favourable construals,

defensiveness and self-affirming reflections. Further, Hepper *et al.* (2010) showed that these instantiations, and their factorial structure, is applicable in East-Asian culture as well.

Seligman & colleagues (2005) [24], created positive psychology exercises to help people be happier. They have been tested on thousands of people to see which one worked. Some of the important are- gratitude visit, three good things in life, identifying signature strengths, using signature strengths in a new way, placebo control exercise and you at your best.

Gratitude visit constitutes writing and delivering a letter of gratitude in person to someone to whom the participant has never been thanked for their contribution in life. In the three good things, participants write down three things that went good each day. They were also asked to provide a causal explanation for each good thing. Identifying signature strengths constitutes taking a survey on character strengths and to note their five highest strengths, then were advised to use them more often. The participants were asked to take the inventory of character strengths online using signature strengths in a new way and to receive individualized feedback about their top five signature strengths (Peterson *et al.*, 2005a) [24]. They were then asked to use one of these top strengths in a new and different way every day for one week. In role of early memories participants were asked to write about their early memories every night. You at your best can be defined as writing about a time when the participants were at their best and then to reflect on the personal strengths displayed in the story. They were told to revisit their story for a week once a day, and focus on the strengths they found.

Mongrain and Anselmo-Matthews (2012) [17], replicated the study conducted by Seligman and colleagues (2005) [24]. showed that the positive psychology exercises led to lasting increases in happiness. They also found that positive psychology exercises would improve satisfaction by encouraging optimistic, self-relevant information rather than by other mechanisms.

A multitude of research studies show that positive psychological exercises such as journal writing are effective in increasing the self-awareness and happiness of people. (Morgain and Matthews, 2012) [17].

The present education system is directed towards equipping the young people to handle the external environment (which also is a stage of transformation) but there is lack of emphasis on handling inner self which is in constant state of turmoil and confusion. Even the methods in the mainstream psychology are oriented towards the external which is a clear disconnect from Indian culture and way of life. Positive psychology techniques may bridge this gap in lives of Indian Psychology students. Hence the present study was

designed to assess the impact of practicing different positive psychology exercises on self-awareness and self enhancement. The following objectives were proposed:

- Objective 1: Using positive psychology exercises for enhancing self-awareness.
- Objective 2: Using positive psychology exercises for self enhancement.

**Method**

**Sample**

130 female college students, age ranging from 19-21 years, pursuing psychology honours course were selected through convenience and purposive sampling.

**Tools Used**

**Journal Writing**

It involved reporting one’s feelings and thoughts five times during the day. It helped the participants keep track of their real feelings and thoughts throughout the day and to identify any recurring patterns of maladjusted behaviour and to correct them, eventually leading to improvement in one’s self.

**Gratitude exercise**

This activity included enlisting at least 3 things one is grateful for at the end of every day. This helped enhance one’s feelings of thanksgiving and helped one feel positive and replete with resources for coping with stress and difficulties when need be.

**Gratitude letter**

This activity involved writing a letter to a person one is grateful for. This helped enhance one’s relationship with that person and also filled one up with feelings of gratitude with respect to having a strong sense of an indomitable support system.

**Anonymous good deed**

This activity involved doing an anonymous good deed for a stranger. This activity helped one develop a sense of goodwill that isn’t limited to just the persons one knows or only to deeds whose source is known, but also to total strangers who possibly wouldn’t know who their good wisher is.

These activities, all in all, helped one move towards the positive side of the continuum by making one grateful for what one already has and what one can contribute to the society.

**[Insert Table 1]**

Table 1 provides a sample of how positive psychology exercises were executed along with verbatim evidence.

**Table 1:** Execution of Positive Psychology Exercises- A Sample

Themes	Verbatim
1. Diary Writing	“Dear diary, I feel relaxed after being able to pour my heart out here. I feel lighter after penning down my feelings, I feel I should do it more often” “Writing down my scattered thoughts about life, its meaning and its purpose has helped me realign my thoughts in a more organized fashion, and helped me look for real answers instead of running around in circles.”“After being able to write about my feelings I feel a lot calmer, and less angry which is a great thing for me” “I had a horrible day in class today, but when I came back home and was sitting in the dark in my room, I heard the sound of little feet tapping across the room and Pluto came up to me and licked me all over as if healing me from the inside I felt grateful for his presence. I hate how I ignore him sometimes because of work pressure, he is a blessing in disguise” “I felt grateful for the delicious paranthas (Indian bread) my mother cooks every other Sunday, they make me feel alive and happy.” “I never could have mustered the courage to write this letter had it not been for this practical. I am very grateful to you for initiating this study.” “Cleaning the college corridor felt good the other day. I put a positive intention in the universe, however small, good is bound to come back to me.”
2. Weekly group interaction	
3. Three things I am grateful for	
4. Gratitude letter	
5. Anonymous good deed	

**Procedure**

Four positive psychology exercises and weekly group discussions were practised by the participants for a period of six weeks in two batches of 60 and 70 students respectively. Two exercises were conducted on a regular basis, namely, journal writing and expressing gratitude. In journal writing, participants had to pen down their feelings and thoughts for five times a day, at uneven intervals. For this, participants had *set alarms* to remind them about recording their feelings and thoughts. At the end of each day, participants recalled their day and three good things that happened to them during the day. Third activity included performing an anonymous deed, whenever possible. Lastly, each participant wrote a letter to somebody they were thankful to and post it to them. Personally delivering the letter and reading it to the person was even more appreciated.

Weekly group discussions played a very important role in smooth execution of the positive psychology exercises. They were moderated by an able facilitator. They helped the participants to remain on track and diligently practice the exercises.

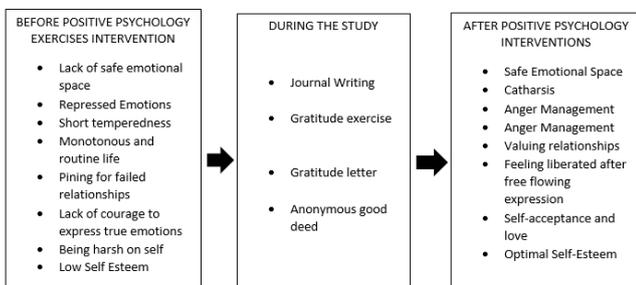
In the initial weekly group discussions participants shared all their concerns and anxieties related to their personal and student life. All meetings were paraphrased with a promise of to maintain confidentiality. The verbatims of participants who gave their consent have been used shared by the authors, without revealing their identity. The researchers took particular care to make sure that no verbatim which may reveal the identity of the participant was shared. At the end of six weeks a theme-based analysis of the change experienced by the participants was carried out based on there inputs. The same procedure was followed by the second batch of students in the next semester.

**Results**

[Insert Table 2]

The table 2 represents the pre and post themes, generated through theme-based analysis namely- lack of safe emotional space vs. safe emotional space, repressed emotions vs. catharsis, short- temperedness vs. anger-management, monotonous and routine life vs. gratitude Towards small things in life, pining for failed relationships vs. valuing relationships, being harsh on self-vs. Self-acceptance and love, low self-esteem vs. optimal self-esteem.

Insert Figure 1



**Fig 1:** Figural representation of the impact of positive psychology interventions

**Discussion**

The researchers termed the entire journey of the positive psychology intervention exercises as a significant andlasting step taken forward towards self-awareness and self-

enhancement. Hence the study was also titled like wise. The analysis below constitutes the description and critical evaluation of all the major components of intervention and the theme-based analysis describing the journey towards self-awareness and self-enhancement.

Journal writing proved to be an extremely cathartic experience for the participants, as it served as an emotional outlet for all the blocked-up feelings and emotions. They reported feeling significantly better and lighter after pouring down their feelings. A large amount of literature substantiates the fact that journal writing is a well-recognized method used by school-therapists all across the globe to promote feelings of catharsis in the clients (Adams, 1996) [1]. They also reported feeling calmer and less angry at the world after being able to vent out their feelings of anger and distress through writing in the journal at different moments during the day. Tang (2001) found that journaling thoughts lead to a clinically significant outcomes in anger management intervention. Proper organization of cognitions that were earlier scattered and unfocused was another improvement reported by the client as a result of undertaking journal writing.

Some participants believed that recovery from bitter past experiences can be a lengthy process but still these exercises made them more hopeful for future. They came to examine and process some of their own behaviours and belief systems regarding their perception of self. They were often surprised by their self-discoveries during their journal writing experience. Several participants described these experience as an “eye-opening.” Writing a journal five times a day helped them in planning, prioritizing and scheduling things which aided in improving their time-management skills.

Gratitude exercise helped enhance feelings of gratefulness and positivity. They reported experiencing serious epiphanies which they had been ignoring previously. They were grateful for small blessings of their life which significantly contributed to their wellbeing. For example one participant beautifully expressed the importance of pet in her life and termed it as a furry friend in her life (table 1). Clements (2003) found that pets bring unconditional love and joy in one’s life which enhances one’s well-being. Such simple experiences and joys had a huge potential to achieve the overall goal of self-awareness and self-enhancement.

“Three things you are grateful for” exercise helped the participants to enhance their sense of gratitude leading to optimal wellbeing and a state of peace. They identified the importance and indispensability of certain relationships which provided them unconditional love and regard like their parents or sincere friends. Their presence in life was reassuring and gave them the confidence that they will not be alone during tough times.

Yet another activity that the participants took up was writing the gratitude letter which involved writing a letter to a person one is grateful for. They got an opportunity to confess their feelings through this exercise to someone special. They were able to express how grateful they were to that person and this, in turn, helped them to confront their emotions thus generating positive feelings and uplifting their mood.

Weekly group discussions played a pivotal role in successful execution of the study. There were intense sessions which gave a very safe outlet for the participants to share their feelings and experiences. Group members

experienced emotional outbursts. They also shared dilemmas bothering them. Many were also able to resolve them eventually. Some shared that they felt truly alive in these sessions and also experienced the life transforming quality of psychology which they had not experienced in other papers.

One of the participant reported that participating in these interventions brought about a sea change in her approach towards psychology. She moved from disillusionment to enlightenment, pertaining to student life.

The theme based analysis in table 2 further demonstrates the benefits of positive psychology exercises under the various themes.

Positive psychology exercises and weekly group discussions provided a safe emotional space to the participants as they had never experienced before as indicated in the first theme of table 2. In the initial sessions there was a lot of hesitation and self-consciousness which inhibited the participants from sharing the intimate details about their lives. As the sessions progressed, with the help of the facilitator, and build-up of trust among the group members the process of sharing was enhanced. A non-judgmental space was sufficient for the inner catharsis of the group members.

Second theme was repressed emotions and catharsis. Diary writing and sharing in the group were the two major means for expression of repressed emotions. Some of these emotions and experiences had never been shared by the group members with any other person. Frequently overwhelming outpour of emotions occurred, sometimes even resulting in participants breaking down into tears. The facilitator had to handle these situations with great care and empathy. Many participants had anger management concerns which were the manifestation of deeper issues which they were facing in their academic and personal lives. They shared many incidents where the people who were closest to them were targets of their temper outburst. In table 2 the verbatim of the participant shows how her mother became the target of short-temperedness of the participant due to external frustrations. All the positive exercises acted as a catalyst in making them realise that they needed to work upon their anger management skills. They also started exploring strategies to do it. The catharsis brought about by various exercises helped them to calm down and be at peace with themselves. The perception about life in general was very negative for many participants

at the beginning of the study. The rig amount of daily routine bored them. They felt empty and disappointed by the small but frequent failures in their daily life. But during the intervention their outlook underwent a drastic change. The external situations remained the same but the vantage point from which they viewed their life was altered. Gratitude exercises and gratitude letter had a dominant role to play in this transformation. As indicated by the verbatim of the participant in table 2 related to the theme of “Monotonous and routine life” and “Gratitude towards small things in life”.

Another pattern observed by the researchers in the accounts of the participants was relationship issues with the peers, romantic partners and even family members. Many of them had very disappointing breakups and misunderstandings with their loved ones. They were burdened with the memories of these relationships in the present too. The interventions catalysed the healing process and made them realise that focusing on the past was futile and they should invest in the present relationships. (Refer to the verbatim of theme “Pining for failed relationships” and “Valuing relationships”).

It was also observed that feeling of guilt and judging oneself harshly were prominent hindrances in the participants’ effort to move towards self-awareness and self-enhancement. The facilitator’s story about surviving and thriving post her autoimmune disease inspired many participants to accept themselves as they are, and also work towards realising their true potential. They also realised that loving, caring and empathising with their own selves was the first step for fostering healthy relationships and pursuing their goals with confidence and dignity (For verbatim refer to table 2, theme 6).

A related theme was self-esteem. In the initial group sessions many participants had confided about facing low self-esteem issues. But during the intervention, participants started developing novel interests and were eager to learn new things. They felt empowered to take greater risks and pursue challenging goals.

They also shared that the quality of their interactions with their peers improved considerably. As one student commented, “I was always nervous around people, and now, I feel more confident about my ability to interact with people.” All these experiences led to an overall enhancement of self-esteem.

**Table 2:** Theme based analysis- Moving towards self-awareness and self-enhancement

S No.	Pre-Study Themes	Verbatims	Post-Study Themes	Verbatims
1.	Lack of safe emotional space	“My college experience was feeling of isolation and loneliness before this study.”	Safe Emotional Space	“The weekly group discussions helped dispel these feelings, allowing me get to know classmates. They would not otherwise have a chance to meet due to differences in schedules, background and interests. Sharing in this non-judgmental setting was a powerful experience. I learned how I am similar and different from my classmates.
2.	Repressed Emotions	“I was never comfortable expressing my emotions even to my loved ones.” “Gratitude letter is a tough one. I wonder if I will muster enough courage to express my true emotions.”	Catharsis	“Dear diary, I feel relaxed after being able to pour my heart out here. I feel lighter after penning down my feelings, I feel I should do it more often” “Writing the letter to him, enlisting the reasons I am grateful to this person has revealed a hidden purpose in my life.”
3.	Short temperedness	“My loved one is a target of my angry outburst out of frustration.”	Anger Management	“After being able to write about my feelings I feel a lot calmer, and less angry which is a great thing for me”
	Monotonous and	“Life sucks. The same mundane	Gratitude towards	“I had a horrible day in class today, but when I came

4.	routine life	routine everyday with series of disappointments and irritants. I am here to get a degree on psychology but my own mental health is so disturbed.	small things in life	back home and was sitting in the dark in my room, I heard the sound of little feet tapping across the room and Pluto came up to me and licked me all over as if healing me from the inside I felt grateful for his presence. I hate how I ignore him sometimes because of work pressure, he is a blessing in disguise” “I felt grateful for the delicious paranthas (Indian bread) my mother cooks every other Sunday, they make me feel alive and happy.”
5.	Pining for failed relationships	“I have been heartbroken since the day my friend broke up with me, two years back on a petty issue.”	Valuing relationships	“In these weeks I learnt that by carrying the baggage of the past I am doing injustice to the people who love and care for me.” “Mom fixed my laptop like she has been fixing my life whenever I have needed her and I know we have unresolved issues but I am truly grateful that she is my mother because I have no idea what I would do without her”
6.	Being harsh on self	“I have tortured myself by over thinking things and have judged myself very harshly. I have realized this only after listening to your (facilitator) story about fighting physical disease and mental trauma.”	Self-acceptance and love	“I have changed my negative views about myself and I am brave and empowered now.”
7.	Low Self Esteem	“I was always nervous around people;”	Optimal Self-Esteem	“I feel more confident in my ability to work with people.”

**Conclusion**

The primary purpose of this study was to elucidate the efficacy of using positive psychology exercises for self-awareness and self-enhancement. It can be stated emphatically that positive psychology exercised based interventions played significant role in helping the participants to achieve the goals of self-awareness and self-enhancement.

However, all the interventions did not worked equally well for all the participants, some of the participants were aversive of journaling as they did not liked their experiences in general. Thus, the facilitator has to suggest some alternative means of expression.

**Limitations**

The study cannot claim that the positive changes experienced by the participants were sustainable and long-lasting. The probability that the participants gave up the practice of these exercises after the completion of the study cannot be ruled out.

The sample consisted of psychology students who may be innately motivated to make these exercises work. Similar results may not be obtained with other samples. Most of the positive psychology exercises relied on the memory of the participants.

As memory is largely reconstructive, biases in self-report may have been magnified due to the amount of time between the event and its verbal account. Due to time constrains, in both the semesters, the intervention duration was six weeks. The difficulties in conducting these studies, however, are far outweighed by their value to the field.

The results of this study will hopefully encourage further research on related issues. Positive psychology exercises cannot replace clinical and psychotherapeutic interventions where ever required.

Though the facilitator suggested the participants experiencing extreme symptoms and mental distress to seek professional help, but beyond that could not do much. The repressed sub conscious anxiety and conflicts were brought to forefront during the group sessions but sometimes the

participants left the session more disturbed and restless than when they have started the session.

**Suggestions for Future Study**

Students from other courses should also be considered for similar studies. Further research should consider using more frequent and real-time methods of assessment, using objective criteria for assessing specific behaviours, and also augmenting self-report with other modes of assessment. Longitudinal studies should be carried out to assess the efficacy of positive psychology exercises for sustainability and maintenance of all the positive changes they initiated. Present study was on the female sample only, so similar studies should be conducted on males as well. Further studies can also examine the gender differences in the response to positive psychology exercises.

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