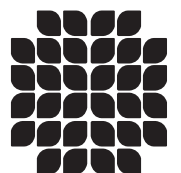
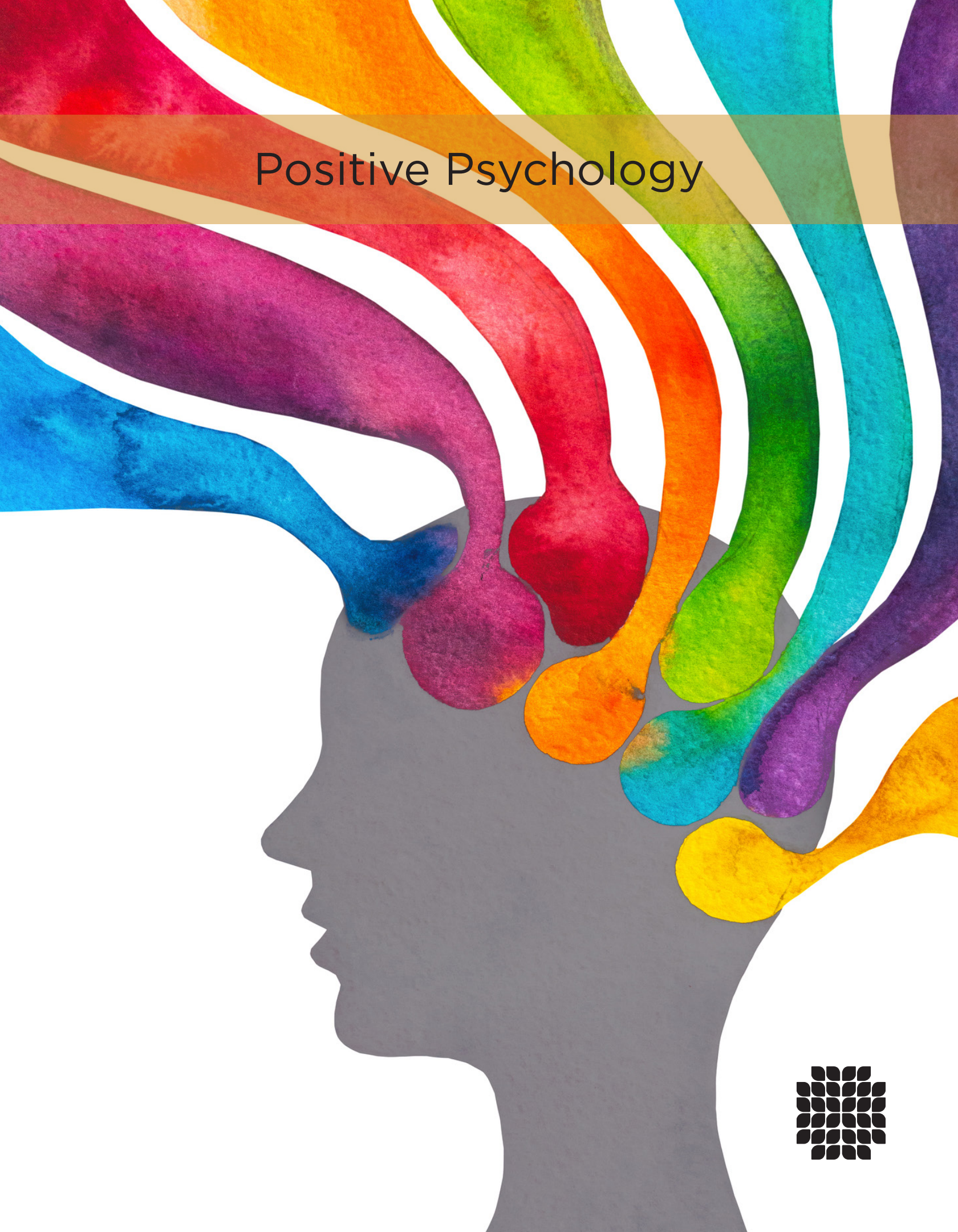


# Positive Psychology



## Positive Psychology: A Boost in Mental Health Recovery

Traditionally, the goal of most treatment programs for those struggling with mental health concerns is deficit based. That is, the goal is to reduce symptoms of depression, or anxiety, or pain or trauma. The assumption is that if the feelings of depression or anxiety decrease, or if sobriety is achieved, then a sense of calm will improve, as will happiness. While this may be true, it is not always the case 100% of the time. The focus on these negative human states solely measures progress by monitoring for example, “How much has your depression decreased?” Harvard psychiatrist George Vaillant cited the example of a standard psychiatric textbook used by psychiatrists and clinical psychologists. The textbook, he says, “contains roughly a million lines of text, with thousands of lines devoted to anxiety and depression, and hundreds discussing terror, shame, guilt, anger, and fear. But only five lines in the textbook discuss hope, only one mentions joy, and not a single line mentions compassion or love.”

Consider the benefits of an inverse approach called positive psychology. Positive psychology is a strengths-based approach that encourages individuals to explore the positive and meaningful experiences that they’ve had in their lives and learn how to tap into them to improve their resilience. Traditional talk-therapy can have an emphasis on the negative impact that past events may have had on an individual’s life, whereas positive psychology shifts the focus to an individual’s perceived strengths and ways that the past can help him/her move forward into a place of thriving rather than surviving.

The study and use of positive psychology does not diminish the crippling effects of depression, anxiety, anger, and trauma. Instead, it works harmoniously with therapies and medication management to broaden and build positive emotions. The premise of this Broaden and Build Theory<sup>1</sup> is the recognition that positive emotions shouldn’t replace negative emotions. Instead, it is the recognition that both negative and positive emotions must co-exist with the idea that positive emotions build resources to cope with negative ones.



## **Broaden and Build Theory: Broadening Thoughts and Actions and Building Personal Resources**

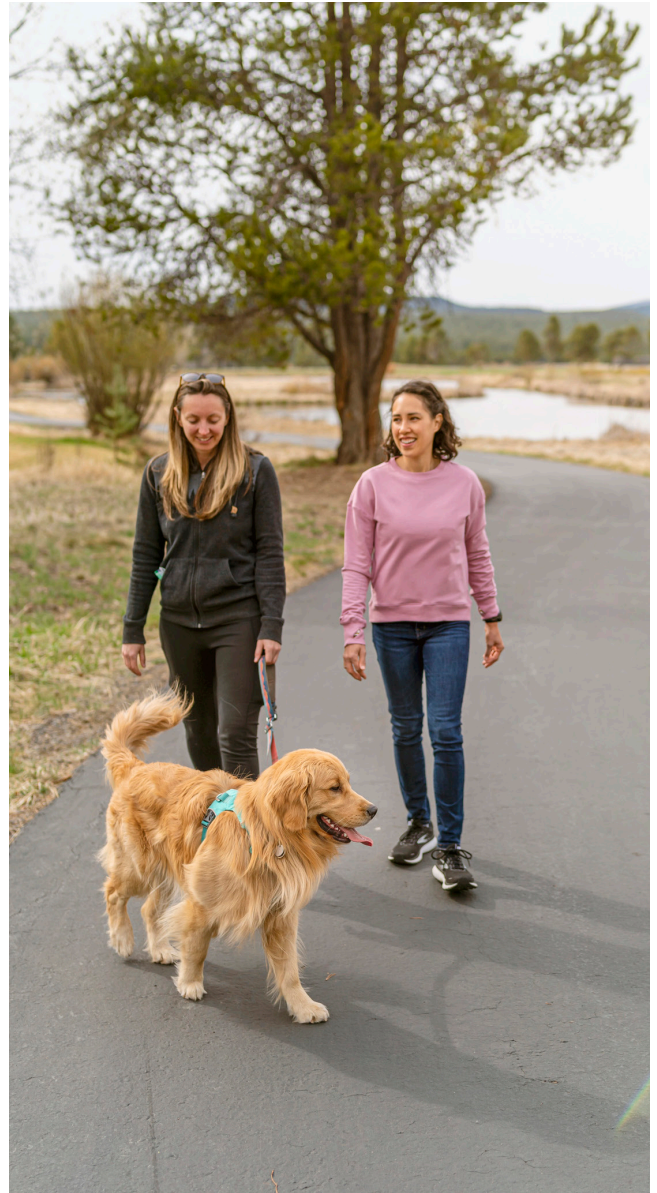
The Broaden and Build Theory, developed by Barbara Fredrickson, PhD in 2001, is built on the idea that positive emotions broaden an individual's momentary thought-action repertoire thereby contributing to good health and functioning. Some examples of the list of these positive emotions and the actions they motivate include the idea that joy sparks the urge to play, and interest sparks the urge to explore. These are in stark contrast to narrower mindsets that are characteristic of many negative emotions, such as fleeing a negative confrontation or verbally attacking someone one disagrees with. By stimulating a positive action, the theory has found that individuals have a more open mind that helps them be more creative and pursue social bonds which are key to resilience.

### **A Foundation for Wellbeing**

At the turn of the century, there was a recognition by Martin Seligman, then president of the American Psychological Association who wrote a now-iconic introduction on the concept of positive psychology in the journal "American Psychologist," that Americans were at a critical crossroad when it came to quality of life. In the January 2000 issue, he wrote of his concern that the accelerating quest for material wealth was creating a growing disregard for overall wellbeing. He felt so strongly that the field of psychology needed to append its approach because he predicted that American society was headed for a total breakdown unless we began giving attention to the "human needs" of the population. He was worried that increasing selfishness would lead to "...alienation between the more and the less fortunate, and eventually to chaos and despair."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>15347528 (nih.gov)

<sup>2</sup>[Seligman \(2000\) Positive Psychology - An Introduction.pdf \(andrews.edu\)](#)



“When positive emotions are in short supply, people get stuck. They lose their degrees of behavioral freedom and become painfully predictable. But when positive emotions are in ample supply, people take off. They become generative, creative, resilient, ripe with possibility and beautifully complex.”

**- Dr. Barbara Fredrickson**

From this time forward, he devoted his career to furthering the study of positive emotion, positive character traits, and positive institutions and became known as the founder of the positive psychology movement. Very simply he believed that while we all go through difficult experiences (some more than others), it is possible to experience higher levels of happiness. There is a feeling of empowerment that can come with recognizing that there are things we can do to help ourselves feel happier, that there are components of this that are within our control and that our ability to find enjoyment in life is not completely at the mercy of our circumstances.

According to Dr. Seligman's theory, there are five Pillars of Positive Psychology<sup>3</sup>, each of which is key to building happier and more fulfilling lives:

**Positive Emotion:** This route depends upon how much an individual is able to experience positive emotions since emotions tend to fluctuate and our ability to be positive is partly genetic. The idea is that individuals can increase their positive emotions about the past, present and toward the future through cultivating gratitude and forgiveness, becoming more mindful to appreciate physical pleasures by building hope and optimism.

**Engagement:** Engagement is an experience in which someone fully deploys their skills, strengths, and attention toward a task. The idea is that this engagement produces an experience called "flow" which in itself is gratifying regardless of the end result of the engagement. Being involved in the activity is its own reward. The concept of flow is experienced when an individual pursues a goal within their skill set that fully absorbs them in the moment, both distorting the perception of time and creating a sense of disappearing self-awareness. Examples include things like engaging in a lively conversation or work task, reading a book, gardening, playing a musical instrument or a sport, etc.

**Relationships:** Relationships are considered a fundamental part to an individual's wellbeing since connections to others create a feeling of belonging and provide purpose and meaning in life, often giving individuals emotional support that helps in tough times. There is also an evolutionary aspect to the importance of relationships in that those connections promote our survival and enables our capacity for love, compassion, kindness, cooperation, empathy, teamwork, self-sacrifice, and a host of other benefits. There is also research that shows that doing acts of kindness for others produces an increase in wellbeing.

**Meaning:** When individuals serve something bigger than oneself, they derive a sense of meaning and purpose can create a depth of belonging. Societal institutions exist that enable that sense of meaning, whether it be through a place of worship or spirituality, family, politics, work organizations, social causes, community connections, among others.

**Accomplishment:** Individuals often feel at their pinnacle when they are in pursuit of a goal. The achievement, competence, success, and mastery that occurs whether it be through one's work or through sports or hobbies can help lead to accomplishments that build positive emotion, meaning, or relationships.

<sup>3</sup> [PERMA™ Theory of Well-Being and PERMA™ Workshops | Positive Psychology Center \(upenn.edu\)](https://www.upenn.edu/positivepsychology/perma-theory-of-well-being/)

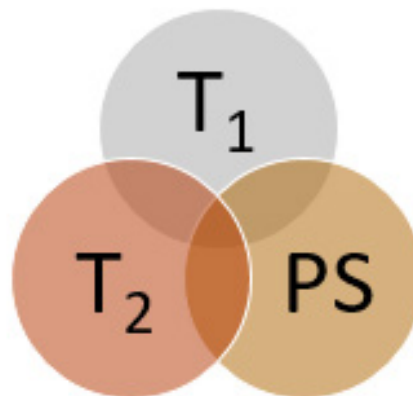
## Positive Psychology and Recovery

Since the connection to positive emotions and experiences has been studied to have a profound impact on individuals and their openness to experiences and learning, positive psychology is increasingly finding its way as part of recovery curriculum. A new base of evidence is emerging which focuses on wellbeing that is opening the door to developing evidence-based interventions.<sup>4</sup>

*“The idea is broadening the thought that health is more than the absence of illness. The idea of addressing overall wellbeing opens the door to the ideas introduced by positive psychology and its powerful effect on improving individuals’ mental flexibility.”*

People who have experienced traumatic episodes in their lives that land them in recovery programs are often at a disadvantage from the scarring effects of those experiences, whether they acknowledge the trauma or not. It decreases their ability not only to see how they respond to certain situations, but also limits how they think about those situations and other options available to them in terms of how to better respond. Trauma keeps them stuck in negative thought loops that are difficult for them to escape.

Compounding those negative thought loops, the human brain tends to naturally filter the world and our experiences negatively to help conserve resources and limit the amount of information it has to take in. This tendency further decreases the ability to see options in engaging in one’s own recovery. Positive psychology opens the pathways of the brain to be able to explore and engage in recovery modalities. The mental flexibility that positive psychology creates is beneficial to recovery modalities. When combined with traditional therapies and prescribed medications, the positive psychology may be a promising way to support recovery in people with mental illness, such as depression, substance abuse disorders, and psychosis.<sup>5</sup>



T1= Traditional Therapies T2= Medication PS= Positive Psych  
Positive psychology complements traditional therapies and medications used in recovery.

<sup>4</sup> Mental illness and well-being: the central importance of positive psychology and recovery approaches - PubMed (nih.gov)

<sup>5</sup> Positive psychology: an approach to supporting recovery in mental illness - PubMed (nih.gov)

## **Benefits of Positive Psychology in Recovery**

The benefits of positive psychology have been studied and have been found to have an impact on physiological health. An NCBI study shows that inducing positive emotions speeds cardiovascular recovery following a stressful event. In addition, research has uncovered that psychological health assets such as positive emotions, life satisfaction, optimism, and social support, are associated with good health when measured in a variety of ways.

Additionally, for many years a disease module has been at the forefront that focuses on what is “broken” with someone. Positive psychology, on the other hand, focuses on an individual’s strengths, which can be an empowering approach for clients that benefits them by encouraging them to look at the aspects of their life in where they have succeeded. By asking them to expand upon those, rather than exploring the ways in which they feel that they are failing or struggling, changes the focus on what is possible for them in their lives.

The downstream consequences of this approach can lead to self-compassion which can increase your positive affect, decrease negative affect, and provide greater life satisfaction, social connectedness, emotional intelligence and happiness. In addition, what follows is often an unburdening of ones’ self which equates to less anxiety, depression, shame, fear, failure and burnout.

## **Objections to Positive Psychology as an Approach in Mental Health Treatment**

Positive psychology is sometimes looked down upon for being “the Pollyanna of the fields of psychology,” as the one that looks for everything that’s going right when there is so much that could be going wrong. While it’s important to note the difficult realities in life, it’s equally important to make note of the ways in which individuals are all capable of thriving.

Yet for individuals who are seeking treatment and recovery for a variety of ailments, traumas, mental illnesses, personality disorders, and addictions, the idea of going from just surviving to thriving, can be out of the realm of their current thinking. For some, the idea of positive psychology can initially be viewed as trite or even insulting. Consider someone who has been abused in multiple ways and perhaps found the only way to cope was through alcohol or drugs. Asking them to participate in a gratitude practice – which is often an exercise in positive psychology – is difficult. For them and perhaps for many others, finding things to be grateful for in their lives can be difficult. Yet, when thoughtfully integrated into a recovery program, positive psychology can actually help reduce the time they spend sitting in their own misery. And, when there is high participation and individuals are open to the ideas presented, they often find positive psychology to be a boost in helping them rebound more quickly.

At Sierra Tucson, the goal is to present the positive psychology program in a way that successfully integrates the concepts for residents to help them embrace it as part of their path to recovery success. Consequently, it was created with these tenants:

- To avoid the perception of presenting positive psychology as “toxic positivity.”
- To not exclusively focus on positive experiences at the expense of acknowledging necessary uncomfortable or negative ones.
- To make space for the negative experiences and emotions that people have and need to process.

- To not invalidate or negate the experiences of people who come from difficult backgrounds and who could be prone to more difficult situations.
- That there is a realm of psychology that focuses on the positive. Many times, people see psychologists/psychiatrists/therapists as being people who are trying to “fix” them and this can be a barrier to people seeking treatment in the first place.

### **The Positive Psychology Program at Sierra Tucson**

More than ever, individuals are desiring positivity and social connection. The pandemic created a different world where we saw less of each other, and even in person, with the necessity of wearing masks, many found themselves literally seeing less of each other – warm smiles were obscured by paper or cloth coverings and a new term, social distancing, replaced the familiarity of socializing. Many felt shut off from friends and family. By limiting our ability to communicate and connect with people, the negative affect increased and exacerbated many of the mental health conditions that people are seeking treatment for. The need for hope, for possibility, for cultivating engagement and relationships, for discovering meaning and purpose – all the principles of positive psychology – has perhaps never been greater.

Daily, individuals feel a variety of emotions beyond just being happy and being sad. Being a fully flourishing person involves understanding and identifying all the other emotions individuals are capable of feeling. With positive psychology, individuals are taught to cultivate those and the positive things that harnessing those emotions will lead to. Empowering individuals to understand that they have the ability to cultivate those emotions is a life skill individuals learn through positive psychology that is useful well beyond treatment. Yet there wasn't a residential treatment program in the nation that fully incorporated the idea of appending their patient schedules with the concepts of positive psychology.

**In 2021 the positive psychology initiative at Sierra Tucson was launched with the intention of offering something that was different than what traditional treatment looks like.**



started with taking a good look at existing programming. Through that analysis, there was a realization that although treatment offerings were making a huge impact on residents and improving their lives, adding light-heartedness to the programming through teaching positive psychology would provide residents some relief on the hard work that they do daily. After all, dealing with trauma, processing ways to eliminate unhealthy coping strategies, and generally, taking a deep dive into how life went off track is serious work that doesn't leave a lot of time to discuss joy, gratitude, love, optimism or the benefits of the emotions that go along with them.

The schedule of an individual experiencing residential treatment at Sierra Tucson typically may include process groups for two hours, trauma therapies, Cognitive Behavioral Therapies, doctors' appointments, anger management sessions, and other therapies that require internal self-reflection. The idea of introducing positive psychology into the programming was intended to offer residents some relief from that necessary hard work, while also providing a recovery boost. While reducing depression or anxiety or working on limiting the impulses toward self-harm are extremely important goals, they are deficit-based. Positive psychology is the opposite. Cultivating positive emotions helps residents broaden their mindsets and sets them up to be more receptive in other areas as they experience the evidence-based therapies and modalities that are part of their Sierra Tucson recovery program.

And, in order to create a program that was congruent with the standard of care established by the Sierra Tucson Model of Care, a positive psychology program was custom created with the whole person approach in mind. Working with a health and social psychologist from the University of Texas A&M, 45 unique modules were developed specifically for Sierra Tucson residents. Each of the modules was derived from research published in peer-reviewed journals from leading experts in Positive Psychology. The modules included altruism, authenticity, forgiveness, flow, creativity, love, gratitude, and optimism, to name a few. After the modules were developed, Sierra Tucson's Chief of Clinical Innovation reviewed each and overlaid the concepts with trauma-informed care principles and evidenced based therapies that guides all programming at Sierra Tucson.





## What does a Positive Psychology Session at Sierra Tucson look like?

Positive psychology modules offered at Sierra Tucson include:

- Altruism
- Authenticity
- Awe
- Creativity
- Emotional Intelligence
- Empathy
- Flow
- Forgiveness
- Gratitude
- Happiness
- Hardiness
- Hope
- Love
- Nostalgia
- Optimism
- Resilience
- Self-Compassion
- Spirituality

When residents enter a positive psychology session, they are reminded that it is a different experience than what they have become accustomed to compared to their other treatments. They are provided an overview of what the day's session will cover while being reminded to view this as a "boost" to all the other recovery work they are doing. There is also emphasis on the fact that positive psychology isn't designed to minimize their negative experiences or feelings or that by simply thinking positive everything will suddenly be alright. Toxic positivity on the other hand suppresses negative feelings and negative experiences, which is why participants are instructed at the beginning of the session that this class is an "AND skill." They work on their tough issues through therapy and their other modalities AND this is the boost to all that work reminding them that they can harness their own positivity. It sets the tone and expectation of the class and decreases resistance to the concepts. Acknowledging and honoring the negative in our lives gives way to helping us to understand and open our minds to the positive concepts that can change our path.

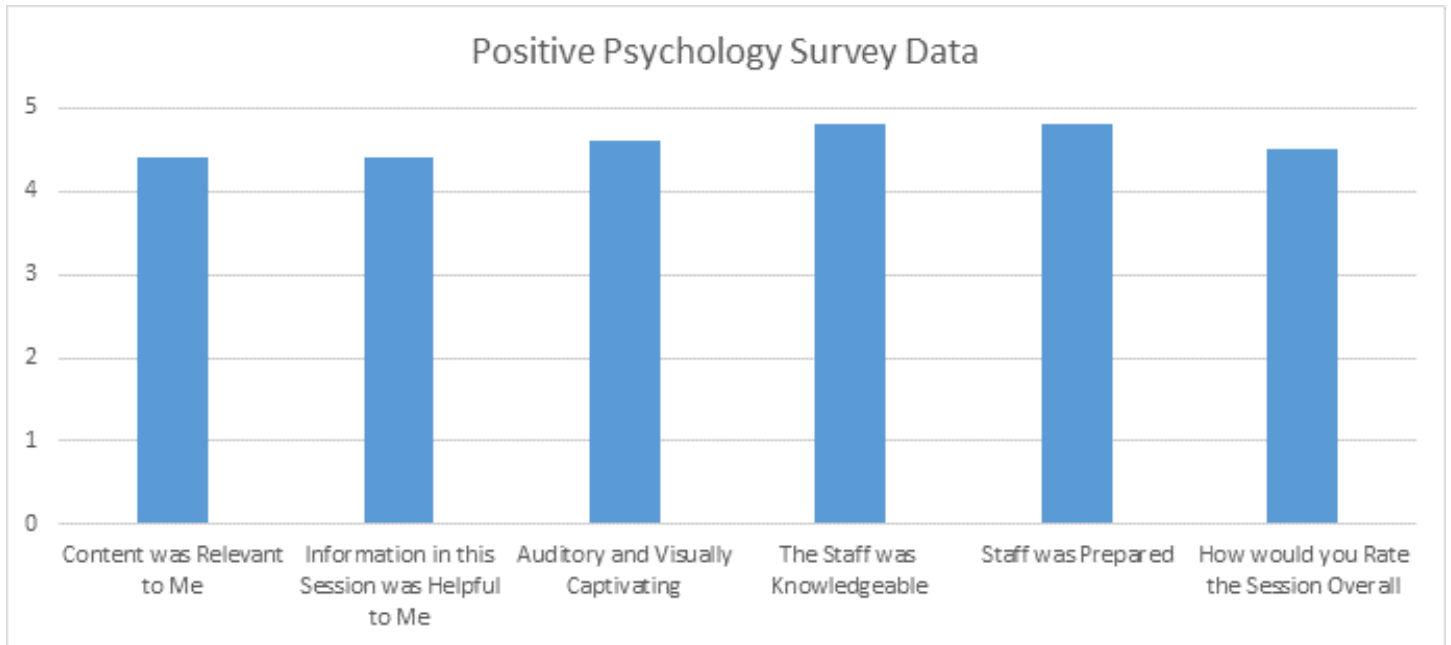
Engagement is encouraged and once the topic is introduced, the therapist leads with the question of day to provoke thought. One recent session was started with the questions "what games do you remember playing with as kids?" Questions like this launch discussion of memories and nostalgia and the importance of play. By getting people to be open and share experiences around the concept of play segues into the research around creativity and reminds people how important something like play is for taking care of an individual's well-being. The concept of "play" may be one of the modules that helps residents broaden their pool of momentary thoughts and actions (others include joy, interest, pride, or love) and in doing so, it helps them to build positive emotions that lead to helping them live a more enriched life.

Over time, the positive psychology therapists at Sierra Tucson have adjusted the modules, each of which is an activity designed to engage residents, such as keeping a gratitude journal or writing down 10 things they are grateful for. A formal syllabus provides a structure to the class to meet the needs of residents:

- A brief overview of what positive psychology is.
- An introduction to the "positive emotion of the day" through discussion of meaningful quotes by prominent historical figures (which can also be used as meditations).
- A positive psychology definition of the topic of the day.
- A discussion of downstream consequences (what it can lead to).
- Simple strategies to cultivate the positive emotion.
- A video or illustration related to the topic.
- An activity to more closely analyze or cultivate the positive emotion.
- Homework assignments.

## Feedback from Sierra Tucson Residents

Caption: Data collected measuring the satisfaction from 100 clients on this topic is below. The topics above were rated by class participants with a maximum score of 5.



“Seeing happiness as something one can manufacture changes my perspective. After attending this class, I have a brighter perspective on my mood and the world.”

“I think I finally understood the blessing in my mother’s cancer diagnosis. I feel unlocked, like I can actually go work on it now.”

“Focusing on little positive moments can help your brain start to seek out positive experiences.”

“This is an absolutely necessary course! This is an incredibly valuable topic, and has opened me up to new ideas, and has allowed me to access the full benefits of other classes at Sierra Tucson.”

“I get to create my own happiness when outside sources are not giving me the happiness I desire.”

