

The one change that worked: When good things happen, I write them down – and it's made me more optimistic

Level 2: Intermediate

a. Discuss the questions with a partner.

1. Are you more optimistic or pessimistic? Why?
2. What do you do when you have very negative thoughts?
3. How do you remember good things that happen to you?
4. What small good thing has happened to you recently?

2 Key words

a. Match the correct word to each definition. Then find them in the article to read them in context.

catastrophising

conviction

optimist

thankful

fulfilling

draining

reassure

embarrass

chronic

fake

sportier

tendency

intensified

journalling

1. _____ : not real or not genuine
2. _____ : a person who usually expect good things to happen
3. _____ : to make someone feel less worried or more confident
4. _____ : better at sports or more athletic
5. _____ : something that usually happens in a certain way
6. _____ : feeling grateful or appreciative
7. _____ : lasting a long time or happening often
8. _____ : a strong belief or opinion
9. _____ : very tiring, especially mentally or emotionally
10. _____ : to make yourself look silly or awkward in front of others
11. _____ : making you feel satisfied or happy because something is achieved
12. _____ : became stronger or more serious

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13. _____: imagining the worst possible outcome of a situation

14. _____: writing regularly in a personal journal

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You might have to change the form of the word.

1. She spoke with such _____ that everyone in the room believed her argument.

2. I have a(n) _____ to drink too much coffee when I'm stressed.

3. Helping the students succeed was one of the most _____ parts of the job.

4. I knew the compliment wasn't _____ because she gave specific examples of what she liked about my work.

5. She has a habit of _____, imagining that a small problem will become a disaster.

6. My younger brother was always _____ than me and spent most afternoons playing football.

7. The _____ on the team believed the project would succeed despite the early problems.

8. Long meetings with no clear purpose can be mentally _____.

9. The storm _____ overnight and caused several roads to close.

10. He tried not to _____ his friend by pointing out the mistake in front of everyone.

11. He's a(n) _____ procrastinator and often leaves his work until the last minute.

12. The manager tried to _____ the staff that no one was going to lose their job.

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13. I felt _____ for the help my colleagues gave me during my first week.

14. He started _____ every evening to reflect on his day.

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Growing up in a difficult household taught me to expect the worst. Then one day I found £20 in the street and shifted my thinking

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- 1 Growing up, I was envious of one type of person. It was never the kids who were smarter, sportier or more popular. I was envious of optimists. I was hypersensitive to the ease with which they sailed through exams, social gatherings or teenage milestones with a sunny conviction that things would work out. "It'll be fine," one such friend would reassure me. "Or you could embarrass yourself," my mind would purr like a villain. "Be rejected. Fail."
- 2 I was a chronic worrier. I couldn't understand that people didn't constantly fear things might go wrong. I grew up as the eldest child in a difficult household where my father's moods changed quickly. Every morning, the second my eyes opened, I would force myself to accept it was going to be a bad day. My thinking was that if you always expected the worst, things had a tendency to turn out better than you imagined.
- 3 It intensified in adulthood, even long after my incredible stepfather came along, and my mum, my brother and I moved in with him. Before a date, a job interview, or a presentation, I'd tell myself it wasn't going to go well. If the opposite was true I'd convince myself it was a one-off fluke. Ruminating on worst-case scenarios would keep me up at night. In therapy I learned I was prone to catastrophising and while exercise, journalling and meditation helped over the years, it flared up at times of stress.
- 4 Early last year, everything changed when I found a £20 note on the ground. I pocketed it. I didn't want to forget how fortunate it felt, so I wrote it down in my notes app. Later, as I walked up to a traffic crossing, the light turned green, as did the two directly after. It was such a funny moment, I jotted it down again.
- 5 From that day on I began to make a list of every single good thing that happened to me, big or small. A train pulling in just as I got to the platform. A neighbour bringing over a slice of cake. All day, every day, I added to my notes app. I began to notice that people were constantly going above and beyond to help me out.
- 6 When my alarm went off, I knew good things were going to happen that day because I had a bounty of proof of it. I went to social events alone, but now I assumed people were friendly and would be interested in chatting to me, and I to them. It became a self-fulfilling prophecy, and more wonderful things came. Or were they already there all along?
- 7 Of course I'm still prone to fretting, but on trickier days I sit and reread my list – which stretches on in my phone – and it reminds me that good stuff is on the way. A friend observed it's just another way of practising gratitude. I know the benefits of gratitude lists are extolled in pretty much every self-help book, but I always found the process of doing them a little fake and draining. If it had been a genuinely bad day, why was I being guilted into writing down that I was thankful for my warm bed, the gift of my breath, or the smell of the rain?
- 8 This list, instead, is real and evidence-based. It is as simple as: this happened and it was good.
- 9 Not too long ago, I used to be convinced that some people had lovely, pleasant thoughts because good things always happened to them. But now, I'm sure it's the other way around.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions with True or False using information from the article. Correct the false statements.

1. When she was growing up, the author was envious of sporty kids. _____
2. The author suggests that she was a negative person because of her difficult homelife as a child.

3. Journalling and meditation didn't work at all to help with her worrying. _____
4. Everything changed when she went to a party. _____
5. She started to make notes on her phone every time something good happened.

6. Taking notes helped her to see the world differently. _____
7. She never reads the list; she just likes to write it. _____
8. The list is another way to practise gratitude. _____

4 Key language

a. Identify the part of speech of the underlined words.

1. Ruminating on worst-case scenarios would keep me up at night
2. My thinking was that if you always expected the worst ...
3. Journalling and meditation helped over the years.

b. Complete the sentences using the words below in the correct form.

watch

learn

read

listen

run

1. _____ helps me relax after work.
2. _____ is good for your health.
3. _____ a new language takes time.

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4. I enjoy _____ movies at the weekend.

5. She loves _____ to music while she works.

- c. Choose an activity that makes you happy or optimistic. Write a sentence like the ones above and share with a partner.

5 Discussion

- a. Discuss these statements.

- It's easy to go from being pessimistic to being optimistic.
- Pessimism is a more realistic way to live.
- Making a list of the small, good things in life is a good idea.
- Lots of people have different ways to be more positive in life.
- It's hard to find time for mental health exercises like journalling, meditation and lists.

6 In your own words

- a. Think about small changes you could make to live a more positive life and write a one-page article explaining them. Use these questions to guide your ideas.

- What things often make you scared or angry?
- What do you do when you feel that way?
- What activities make you feel happy or relaxed?

- b. Work with a partner to proofread each other's work. Share your opinion on the ideas they presented in their article.