

Life lessons

Anxiety, extramarital crushes and difficult bosses – everyone faces these experiences at some time in life, and with good advice to steer you in a helpful direction, you learn a lesson at the same time.

how to... FEEL LESS ANXIOUS



TOBY GREEN says:

Anxiety is on the increase and it's no wonder given the stresses of financial issues, relationships, work, raising children and the competition to succeed (to name just a few!). The answer is to take one thing at a time. If you're suffering from "task overload", make a list of

priorities and deadlines. When addressing the one you deem next on the list, blot out any bleed-over from other tasks. The power of focusing on the one thing will help you feel less overwhelmed. Also try these ideas:

- ✦ Think of life as being like walking into a messy room. Give yourself permission to clean it up on your terms and at your pace. Let your eye land on what you consider the biggest eyesore, rectify that and then stand back. Notice the room is better and less cluttered from just that one adjustment. Select the next item and continue. Give yourself permission to stop when you've had enough. Notice that the room (your life) keeps getting clearer and clearer with each improvement.
- ✦ If you're suffering from an extreme emotional trauma, see your doctor and discuss the possibility of short-term anti-anxiety medication that will take away the anxious symptoms while allowing you to function normally.
- ✦ And remember: "I can only do what I can do the best I can do it."



TIM SHARP says:

It's important to note that some level of anxiety is perfectly normal and healthy. Appropriate levels of anxiety protect us from dangerous situations. However, excessive levels can be distressing and disabling. The key is to ensure things don't get out of hand. Once you accept a certain degree of

anxiety is perfectly okay, you can move on to managing and minimising this distressing emotion. Reducing anxiety comes down to a few simple but powerful strategies.

- ✦ Practise applied relaxation strategies and meditation, such as visualisation, breathing control (see story, page 52), mindfulness and muscular tension reduction. The only "right" way is what's right for you, so try different approaches and practise one that resonates most with you.
- ✦ Manage unhelpful and negative thoughts. In particular, look out for catastrophising (making mountains out of molehills) and over-generalising (unintentionally increasing the likelihood of risk). To remedy this, ask yourself questions such as "Is it really that bad?" or "What are the chances of this really happening?"
- ✦ Facing your fears is ultimately one of the most powerful ways to overcome anxiety. Calm yourself by questioning your thoughts, then get out there and face up to whatever it is that's causing the anxiety – chances are it won't be nearly as bad as you'd feared!

how to... GET OVER AN EXTRAMARITAL CRUSH



TOBY GREEN says:

The best way to get over an extramarital crush is to make sure you never have one, as they wreak havoc on your psyche, not to mention your marriage. Often these crushes have much more to do with something lacking in your primary relationship than the person you have the crush on.

Once you realise you're falling for someone, think about where this is going to end up. If your marriage is in serious trouble and you think the object of your crush is the one for you and that you've made a mistake in marrying your partner, put the crush on hold and get some marriage counselling.

It's a possibility that whatever the issue, it may get resolved satisfactorily, your needs are met and there's no messy divorce, especially if children are involved. Alternatively, if it's determined that there are irreconcilable differences, you part ways. After a politically correct amount of time, you take

your crush out of the closet and get on with it, without having it appear that the reason for your marriage break-up was another person instead of a fatal flaw in the relationship. This inflicts much less pain on all.

- ✦ If you love your partner and have no intention of breaking up, make a commitment to keep the crush at a fantasy level, without the object of the crush knowing you're doing it.
- ✦ Every flirtatious move acted out with that person is going to get you further and further entangled, which will make it harder and harder to extricate yourself when you want to.
- ✦ Should a workplace crush not work out, there's danger of losing your job (depending on who's senior) or facing a rejected relationship every day of the work week.
- ✦ If the crush can be contained to a platonic flirtation that both parties are sure will never go any further, it can add some fun to a person's life. Even better, if that can be injected into the marriage, it's a win-win situation. >

How to...

GET OVER AN EXTRAMARITAL CRUSH



TIM SHARP says: Positive relationships are vitally important for health and wellbeing, so fostering and developing interactions with as

many people as possible is generally a good idea. However, trust and fidelity are extremely important, especially in the most intimate of our relationships. So if you find your eyes wandering beyond the marital boundaries, seriously weigh up the consequences of your options. At the heart of this issue is probably the question of whether the extramarital crush is a serious sign that the marriage is really in trouble or whether the crush is just a temporary temptation that will dissolve if left unfed.

+ In the case of a troubled marriage, couples therapy and/or separation should be considered and the relationship repaired or disentangled as painlessly as possible. **+** If your crush is a temporary temptation, which is more likely to be the case, then just like many other temptations it should be ignored and resisted as much as possible. **+** Ask yourself whether the possibility of short-term pleasure is really worth the likelihood of long-term pain such as guilt, grief, distress and sadness.

+ Ask yourself how you'd feel if you were caught out by your partner. **+** Consider whether the grass really is greener on the other side or whether you'd be better off tending to your own lawn!

“Ask yourself how you'd feel if you were caught out.”

www.bodyandsoul.com.au



+ How would you deal with this issue? Share your thoughts in thebodyandsoul.com.au forum.

How to...

GET ON WITH A DIFFICULT BOSS



TOBY GREEN says:

It's not easy to navigate around a difficult boss and if quitting is not an option, you need strategies. If you need to stick up for yourself because they're a bully or have overstepped your boundaries, acknowledge it to him/her by explicitly naming the offending behaviour. State that although you don't take it personally, and you're sure they wouldn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, you would appreciate them not using that behaviour with you. The fact that you've requested them to "watch it" with you will make them less likely to continue. Perhaps you have other issues, such as:

- +** Your boss needs to be right all the time: in this case, swallow your pride and opinion, agree and do it their way. If the assignment fails, it's not your responsibility.
- +** They are giving inappropriate sexual overtures: here, you can suggest that although you like him/her, you have a policy of not engaging in work-related relationships. It's nothing personal.
- +** Your boss is being inappropriately familiar about their personal life. Don't get involved and try to deflect their comments. For example: "That's a shame, I'm sure that must be distressing" or "Have you ever considered seeing a professional so you have an outlet for venting your circumstances?" That's a sure hint.
- +** Be self-protective, cocoon yourself in "work mode", validate yourself for who you really are and don't take the boss personally.



TIM SHARP says:

Too often, employees place the responsibility of good workplace relationships in the hands of their boss or manager. Although bosses and managers do, obviously, have a role to play (a very important role, in fact) so too does every employee of an organisation. Excluding extreme cases of bullying or inappropriate conduct, more often than not there are things we can all do to improve the quality of the relationships with our colleagues, including those to whom we report. Try these strategies:

- +** Focus on the strengths your boss possesses rather than just his or her weaknesses and faults. I'm not suggesting that he or she is perfect, but we all have positive attributes and endearing or effective qualities and attending more to these can make any relationship more positive.
- +** Look for times when your boss does something good or achieves a degree of interpersonal success, and try to ascertain what was going on and how you can make the most of this. When, for example, is your boss not difficult and how can you create these situations more often?
- +** Don't feel as though you have to deal with this all on your own, if you're having problems with your boss, there's a good chance your colleagues are too. So talk to them in a constructive way (whingeing and complaining usually achieve very little) about how you can all find ways to get on better with your boss, as this is most likely to be in everyone's interest. **+**

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The psychology of *Positive*

Dr Tim Sharp discusses the what, when, where and how of positive psychology and how you can “choose” to use positive psychology to lead a happier, more meaningful and fulfilled life.

Historically, clinical and counselling psychology has focused almost exclusively on fixing problems; psychology as devoted almost all of its efforts to sickness and pathology with relatively little effort or time devoted to real mental health and wellness. This approach has been based on the belief that by addressing faults and weaknesses we'll help people improve their lives.

But this is only partially true because although helping people overcome difficulties (such as anxiety and stress and depression) is important, it might, at best, help them improve from minus 10 to zero. But is zero (or what we call “okayness”) really good enough? Okay is better than not okay but surely we can do better. In fact most of us want much better than just okay which is why positive psychology and the wellness movement more generally, are proving so popular.

But before we get too far ahead of ourselves, let's define what we're actually talking about. Positive psychology doesn't necessarily replace, but it certainly builds upon and extends traditional psychological approaches; for one, it aims not just to help people move out of the negatives but focuses on moving them well into the positives. To continue the metaphor started above, positive psychology argues that although going from minus 10 to zero is a good start, it should only be that...a start.

Once that's achieved we shouldn't finish there but rather, we should focus on moving from zero to positive 10! Instead of the target simply being an absence of distress, therefore, the ultimate goal of positive psychology is to experience a really meaningful and wonderful range of positive emotions (including, of course, happiness).
The goal

becomes not just surviving but thriving; by which positive psychologists mean living a great life, one in which real health and wellbeing leads to flourishing as individuals and as members of a broader community or society.

Along these lines, therefore, positive psychologists have primarily focused on researching, developing and applying practical strategies that we can now be confident will lead to real, meaningful and enduring improvements in health and wellbeing (that's physical, mental, emotional and interpersonal). Before going on, however, I should point out that no one within the positive psychology community believes that anyone will be 100% happy and healthy all the time! This is an unrealistic goal. But, that being said, it's totally realistic to expect to experience health and happiness most of the time and also, to have the skills to bounce back from and work through adversity effectively and quickly, which means that happiness isn't just about enjoying the good times but it's also about working through the tough times as best one can.

What this means is that



positive psychology accepts that so called “negative emotions” are a normal and appropriate part of life. Sadness and grief, stress and anxiety, anger and frustration are all part of being human beings. But, and this is an important but, happiness requires managing these emotions so that they don't become too extreme and so that they don't impact negatively on our lives for too long. The other part of this is that happiness is a term that covers a wide range of positive emotions (much more so than many people realise). Ultimately it means different things to different people; it's an entirely subjective experience. For some, the experience of happiness is one of predominately “high arousal” feelings such as joy and excitement; for others, it involves more “low arousal”, but equally important, emotions such as calm, contentment, peace and tranquillity.

“The ultimate goal of positive psychology is to experience a really meaningful and wonderful range of positive emotions.”

Ideally, we should all try to experience and enjoy all these different forms of positive emotions but the reality is that some people will tend more to the high arousal end of the spectrum (e.g. extroverts) while others (e.g. introverts) might be more likely to seek out low arousal forms of happiness.

Anyway, back to positive psychology from a practical perspective.

In simple terms, positive psychology focuses on what's working rather than on what's not working; it asks what's right rather than what's wrong; the emphasis is on utilising strengths instead of fixing weaknesses (although please note; positive psychology doesn't ignore faults, weaknesses and limitations. It accepts that we all have these but that as much as possible, our efforts and energies should be mostly, on using what we're already good at).

We can sum up the core components of positive psychology that contribute to happiness and success in the following acronym. We believe that achieving

happiness requires nothing more than practicing a few simple disciplines each and every day and to practice these disciplines we need to constantly make the right choices. So, next time you're making a choice remember that “choose” is not just a philosophy of taking responsibility but also, a mnemonic that stands for:

C = Clarity

Clarity refers to your goals, direction and purpose in life. Happy people set goals that are much more clearly defined. They more actively and effectively determine clear and specific plans to ensure these goals become reality. So, set aside some time to clarify your life plan as soon as possible because if you don't do it, no one else will do it for you!

H = Healthy Living

Healthy living is about activity and exercise, diet and nutrition and sleep. Health forms a crucial part of the foundation to happiness. It's hard to be happy if you're literally sick and tired all the time. So, although you don't have to turn vegan and/or run marathons, do whatever you can to be healthy (by eating well, exercising and ensuring you gain adequate sleep and rest) and you'll also boost your chances of being happy.

O = Optimism

Optimism refers to positive but realistic thinking. There's no doubt that happy people think about themselves, others and the world around them differently. Among other things, they search for more positives although they also face up to cold, hard realities in a constructive way. The good news is that this is something you can learn to do so start practicing now – look around you for what's good and look at what you can actively do to fix what's not so good.

O = Others

When we consider others, we are considering the key relationships in your life. Research strongly indicates that happy

people have both more and better quality relationships. Happiness is not a solo sport; it's a team effort. Make sure you devote time to developing and fostering your key relationships because other people matter and compassion, thoughtfulness, caring and consideration of others are key to real and meaningful happiness.

S = Strengths

The “S” for strengths represents your core qualities and attributes. Rather than spending all their time trying to “fix” their “weaknesses”, happy people spend more time identifying and utilising their strengths. So quite simply, stop asking “what's wrong and how can I fix it” quite so often and start asking “what's right and how can I do more of it”. Find out what you're good at (your inner attributes and positive qualities) and do it as much as possible in as many ways as possible.

E = Enjoy the moment

Finally, enjoying the moment is about living in and appreciating the present. The past is history, tomorrow's a mystery, and today's a gift – that's why they call it “the present”. Live in the moment and enjoy life more; learn from the past but look to the future and ask, “What can I do now?” Practice appreciation and gratitude by focusing more on what you have and less on what you don't have.

So there it is, a brief overview of positive psychology or what is sometimes referred to as the science of happiness. If there were one message I'd like you to walk away with it would be that happiness is very much achievable! No matter who you are and what you do, no matter what your background or your current context, you can all learn to live lives with more happiness. We can all become happier. We can't change the past and we can't control all that happens to us but we can CHOOSE how we respond to what happens and as a result, we can (at least partially) determine our future! **em**

Dr Tim Sharp has three degrees in psychology (including a Ph.D.) and an impressive record as an academic, clinician and coach. He runs one of Sydney's largest clinical psychology practices, a highly regarded Executive Coaching practice, and is the founder & CHO (Chief Happiness Officer) of The Happiness Institute, Australia.
www.thehappinessinstitute.com