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ENG 112

Is “Three Good Things” Actually Good?

I am sitting down on couch in my house with the laptop my mom has lent me for school. There aren't any particular smells happening, not that I would be able to smell it considering it is my house and my olfactory senses are used to the scent of my house, in even simpler terms I am home alone and there is no food or anything that would change the scent of my home. I currently have the taste of cranberries on my tongue do to the cranberry juice I am drinking. The linear sound of the clock on the wall is the only sound other than the scribbling of pencil on paper and the occasional typing on the keyboard. I am in the zone since I just finished studying for calculus and have now moved onto the homework associated with what I was studying. I have a test in two days and I have been stressing out about it all week but I am almost done studying and I couldn't be happier to finally finish so I wouldn't have to worry about anything other than memorizing equations and my homework for other classes. A couple minutes later I finish the last problem of calculus and relief washes over me, now that I don't have to worry about hours and hours of math problems, I am finally able to properly hang out with my mom. We put on the movie *Ant-man and the Wasp* and I made some popcorn. We have an air popper so we get to choose what flavor we make it especially since my mom bought a ton of popcorn flavor powders. I made regular buttered popcorn because it is my mom, my dog, and my favorite kind of popcorn. Yes I did say my dog loves buttered popcorn, she will actually spit out plain popcorn

and look at you like you are absolutely insane and is basically asking why you think she will eat this unbuttered crap. My dad didn't believe us at first until he tried to give her some and he got so frustrated with the dog he left the house for a little bit. Anyway we were watching the movie and I was tapping away on my laptop working on the website I am making for the business I am starting. The website I am working on is full of colors from all of the pictures my mom and I took of 3D prints I have made and their fully painted counterparts. Since you have absolutely no idea what I am talking about let me explain. I am making a 3D printing and finishing business where I will 3D print props or anything else that somebody needs printed and if they would like I would sand and paint it as well and then ship it to them. I started this website since I am very passionate about 3D printing and haven't always had access to a 3D printer so I could bring whatever I wanted to to life or to even fix things with a printed part, and I don't want anyone to have to have their ideas stifled by lack of tools. You would think this day ending so well might improve my overall well being and happiness since even though I didn't mention it but I was extremely grateful that I was able to get everything I needed to done that day, but it didn't. So can the "three good things" gratitude process have a positive impact on your well-being? The answer to that question is no, I tried the "three good things" process and it caused me more grief than anything else.

Before I can go on to explore why exactly the process doesn't work for everyone I need to explain my terms first. For example, what exactly positive psychology is. Positive psychology was founded by Martin Seligman and is a "scientific approach to studying human thoughts, feelings, and behavior with a focus on strengths instead of weakness" (Ackerman and Seph). In a

broad sense, positive psychology focuses on positive experiences, positive states and traits, and positive institutions (Ackerman and Seph).

What is gratitude? Gratitude is the state of mind that comes with recognizing positive things in your life that you played no part in or had no control over, or when you cherish the little things in life (Stern and Emmons). Contrary to what you might think, having a thankful state of mind doesn't depend on one's state of life (Stern and Emmons).

What is well-being? Well there isn't an agreement on one definition of the term, luckily for those of us who would like to know what it means, there is a general consensus that at the very least, well-being involves the "presence of positive emotions and moods, the absence of negative emotions, satisfaction with life, and fulfillment and positive functioning" (CDC). In less complicated terms, it can be described as judging one's life in a positive manner and feeling good (CDC).

What research suggests gratitude improves well being? According to psychology today there are 7 scientifically proven benefits of gratitude. The first proven benefit of gratitude is better relationships. Saying thank you and other ways of showing appreciation can help you gain more friends since your appreciation of someone makes them more likely to see a long term relationship (Morin). The second benefit of gratitude is physical health. People who are more grateful or appreciative tend to experience "fewer aches and pains and report feeling healthier than other people" (Morin). In addition, people who are more grateful are more likely to take care of themselves (Morin). The third benefit is psychological health. Gratitude reduces toxic thoughts and emotions one might have (Morin). The fourth benefit is gratitude helps people be more empathetic and less aggressive. "Grateful people are more likely to behave in a prosocial

manner, even when others behave less kindly” (Morin). Participants involved in a study who ranked higher on a measurement of gratitude were less likely to be belligerent with others even when confronted with negativity (Morin). The fifth benefit of gratitude is sleeping better. A study discovered that spending fifteen minutes writing down some appreciative thoughts or statements or using the “three good things” process before going to sleep resulted in more beneficial and longer sleep (Morin). The sixth benefit is self esteem. A study found that people who were more grateful had increased self esteem which allowed them to perform more optimally in whatever they were doing like athletics (Morin). A different study found that gratitude reduces the presence of people comparing themselves to others and instead of envying or resenting people who were better off than they were they were able to be grateful for them instead (Morin). The final benefit that Morin speaks of is increased mental strength. For a long time now, research proves the fact that gratitude doesn’t only help people reduce their stress but can also help people recover from trauma (Morin). A study determined that veterans from the Vietnam War that had higher levels of gratitude were less likely to experience PTSD (Morin).

What research suggests gratitude doesn’t improve well-being? According to Katherine Hobson, not only do people who get higher scores when measuring autonomy experience less gratitude overall but they also value it less. There are scientifically proven benefits of gratitude like physical and mental well-being like I mentioned above, but there are broader claims about how gratitude will help you that aren’t actually backed up by science (Hobson). There was a study that determined there was weak evidence in regards to effectiveness of gratitude interventions like the “three good things” having grand effects on people which isn’t surprising when you look into the details of such studies since the studies were looking to see whether or a

not a quick intervention would actually help you change your measure of gratitude or in different words, whether it could change your personality and make you more appreciative (Hobson). Since most people are already decently grateful, it makes it harder to increase their gratitude even more, however if people do it more long term it could potentially show greater benefits (Hobson). In addition, gratitude isn't always the best thing to have in all circumstances, for example someone in an abusive relationship (Hobson). In conclusion, Hobson believes that processes like "three good things" are most effective when they are targeted at people who have lower happiness to begin with.

The research that supports my data and experience with whether or not the "three good things" process works or not is the research saying everyone can understand how the process works and even try the process but nothing happens. Like Hobson said, most people are already pretty grateful which makes it harder for them to become even more grateful, the quick intervention processes like "three good things" work best on people who are less happy. Even more than that, Liz Brown had an absolutely horrible experience with gratitude lists in that they actually made her more depressed and doubt herself and think she was a selfish asshole who should be grateful for everything she had, and didn't get better until a therapist told her to start making ingratitude lists because she deserved to feel like her life wasn't the best and needed to stop pretending she was in pain.

Can the 'three good things' gratitude process have a positive impact on my well-being? The answer to this question in simple terms is absolutely not and I do not believe it ever will. Some people might react to this by saying you didn't try hard enough, or you didn't do it right, to which I will say this isn't the first time I have tried a process similar to this one except the last

time I tried a process like this I stopped it half way through because I hated the mentality it put me in. The first time I tried this was a year or two ago and it made me feel like a terrible person because some days I would have an extremely hard time coming up with three good things. “Seriously, who can’t name just three things that inspired gratitude in a day?” Is what some people say and my response is sometimes people don’t want to think in a positive way, they want to be angry and negative and rant about everything going wrong or on the other side some people want to express sadness and feel free to cry about things without having someone tell them something like “oh you have so much to be grateful and happy for why are you feeling this way.” However, I do agree with the fact that this isn’t something you should do all of the time because that’s too negative of an outlook that could also make you feel worse. For a week, the process I tried first was a two week thing, I felt like garbage at the end of the day because I was having trouble thinking of three things that I was grateful for. Not only that but it felt like a giant burden since at the end of a busy day where I just wanted to go to bed and watch some videos to wind down I would suddenly remember I had to think of three good things and it was just a frustrating experience that made me feel worse and worse as the week went on, which lead me to stopping the process and go on with my life in the way I normally do.

Before I go on to explaining the second time I tried this process I would like to compare my first time experiences to those of Liz Brown. Liz brown says that she was depressed for three years before realizing that gratitude lists were contributing to her pain. Since it would be ridiculous for me to go through Liz’s story in detail I am going to summarize as much as possible. Liz had a ton of horrible things happen to her in a short time frame which just led her to getting more and more depressed. For example, all three of her cats died and then her dog got

cancer but before that she lost her job and now had to deal with student loans with six years worth of interest. Liz then talks about how everyone told her to write gratitude lists, and I mean friends, family, therapists, anyone she told about her depression just preached to her about gratitude lists. “I started making gratitude lists everyday, following the directions carefully and making sure to be specific about the reasons I was grateful... every time I looked at my lists I said to myself: My life isn’t so bad. Whats wrong with me? Why do I still feel so awful? I sure am a spoiled brat” (Brown). After a hundred days of making gratitude lists, Liz Brown gave up all hope of getting better. That was until she went to a therapist who told her to stop doing gratitude lists because she had a right to be pissed about how crappy her life was and if she was going to make an ingratitude list (Brown). She writes about how she suddenly felt relief the day after. “When I woke up the next day morning, I felt crappy. But I didn’t feel crappy about feeling crappy. And I didnt feel like I was crazy or selfish or self-pitying or ungrateful. I felt sad and stressed because my life was kind of sad and stressful. And that was a huge relief” (Brown). Honestly, once i found this story i felt relieved because both times i did a gratitude process i ended up feeling terrible because i was having troubles coming up with things to be grateful for and if i did it didn’t make me feel any better. I would find myself asking “what is wrong with me? I have a great life and i finally found three things to be grateful for, why isn’t working?” which ended up making me feel worse.

So the second time i have done this process honestly couldn’t have come at a worse time for me. During the week i did the “three good things” process i was completely overtaken with stress, grief, and just all around sadness. I wrote in my blog on november 12th that one of my pets were sick but she was hopefully going to get better in the coming weeks. That was the

complete and utter cause of my sadness and grief for the week my class did the process. My “pet” that turned into “pets” who were sick were my rats Bandit and Gizmo. Bandit had been sick for about a month and was just seeming to get worse. We later found out she had cancer and her sister Gizmo was having an extremely hard time breathing. During the week my class did the process we came to the conclusion we were probably going to be putting the rats down soon. How could i possibly come up with things i was grateful for when i was extremely stressed out from studying for a calculus test and i knew i was going to be putting down my rats soon? I don’t exactly know how i managed to do it but i did, not that it made me happier in the slightest. This time instead of wondering what was wrong with me because i wasn’t feeling any happier i was wondering how i could even try to be happy and grateful when my rats were in pain. The answer was that i forced myself to try and it ended up making me feel even crappier than i would have normally. I would get even more stressed at night when i remembered that i had to do the process and then get even worse when i would have problems thinking about what to write. Even if the process ended up working for me like Hobson says since i wasn’t very happy that week and the processes work better on people who are not as happy it would have been short lived since on the 17th of november, Bandit and Gizmo were put down so they could finally be at peace.

In conclusion, No the “three good things” process cannot have a positive impact on my well-being since both times i have tried it it has just made me feel worse, whether it was because i couldn’t think of things to be grateful for or wondering why it wasn’t working for me like everyone says it will. My main takeaway from this project is that the process absolutely will not work for everyone even though it seems like it is advertised that way to a degree, and that it will never work for me since it just stresses me out. I would personally like to see more research or

stories about the process not working for people so those of us who aren't experiencing the positive side effects won't feel alone or like they are a terrible person.

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