



Timely Information for Personal Success

Noticing the Positive Things at Work

By Joyce E. Bono and Theresa M. Glomb

Over the course of a typical workday, negative and positive things inevitably happen. If you're like most employees, you tend to focus mainly, or even exclusively, on negative experiences. What most people don't realize is that positive experiences — even small ones — provide you with valuable resources that can be used to reduce stress, including physical symptoms such as headaches or muscle tension. They make it easier for you to detach yourself from work at the end of the day.

For most workers, this doesn't come naturally, but consider an experiment we conducted to study the workplace effect of what's known as the "three good things" intervention. This intervention has been shown to improve mood among people who are mildly depressed, but we wanted to know whether it would also relieve stress for healthy employees.

About the Study

Our team worked with employees of outpatient family-practice clinics (nurses, assistants, etc.). We asked participants — who had no idea what our research question was — to log onto a website at the end of their work day and complete a "survey." The survey asked them to spend five to 10 minutes writing about events large or small, personal or work-related, that had gone "really well" that day — and to explain *why* those things had gone well.

Responses ranged from reports of co-workers bringing in delicious food, to the mere fact that it was Friday, to thoughtful stories about interactions with co-workers or patients that made people feel good about themselves.

After three weeks, stress levels and physical complaints declined by small but still significant amounts. Moreover, when participants focused on good things, they were better able to switch off stressful job-related thoughts at home.

Benefits

This simple practice — writing about three good things that happened — creates a real shift in what people think about, and can change how they perceive their work lives. It can also create feedback that enhances its impact: people who reflect on

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Healthy Recipe: Cranberry-Coconut Bread Pudding

INGREDIENTS:

- 5 large eggs
- 3 large egg whites
- 3-1/2 cups whole milk
- 3/4 cup brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped candied ginger
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 2 cups fresh cranberries
- 8 cups day-old whole-wheat bread (1/2 inch cubes)
- 1/2 cup sweetened shredded coconut, lightly toasted

NUTRITIONAL VALUE:

- Calories per serving: 255
- Carbohydrates: 37 g.
- Protein: 11 g.
- Fat: 7 g.
- Saturated fat: 3 g.

DIRECTIONS:

- 1 Whisk eggs and egg whites in a large bowl. Whisk in milk, brown sugar, candied ginger, and vanilla. Add cranberries and stir. Add bread and stir until combined. Let stand for 30 minutes, pressing bread down into the liquid a few times to help it absorb the custard.
- 2 Preheat oven to 350°F. Coat a shallow 3-quart baking dish with cooking spray.
- 3 Transfer the pudding mixture to the prepared pan. Coat a piece of foil with cooking spray and cover the pan, sprayed-side down.
- 4 Bake for 30 minutes. Uncover, sprinkle with coconut and continue baking until puffed and firm to the touch, 25 to 30 minutes more. Let cool for 15 minutes before serving.

LifestyleTIPS®
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 PO Box 322, Waupaca, WI 54981
 Phone: 715-258-2448
 Fax: 715-258-9048
 Website: www.impact-publications.com
 Email: info@impacttrainingcenter.net

Publisher: Scott Kolpien
Health Consultant: Aaron Allie
Managing Editor: Mike Jacquart

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Questions and Answers

Saying No to Treats

Q: *Some might not consider this is a "problem," but with the holidays nearly here my co-workers are going to be bringing in cookies, cake, and tons of other treats. I really need to lose weight, but I don't want to insult all the good bakers I work with. What can I do?*

A: For starters, could you limit yourself to *one* cookie or one *small* piece of cake? Then, if your colleague offers seconds, you can politely say, "No, thanks" and you should come across just fine. If you don't feel you can have even one, you can still be tactful about the matter and politely say something like, "Chris, I know you're a great baker, but my doctor told me sweets are off limits. It's bad timing with the holidays, but that's the way it is." Good luck. ■

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good things that happened during the day are more likely to share those things with family and friends.

Sharing positive events with others creates connections between people, further reducing evening stress. Ultimately, this improves sleep, which research suggests leads to greater alertness and better mood, which in turn leads to more positive things happening the next day.

Other benefits of this easy-to-implement exercise include potential increases in creativity since growth, development, and forward thinking arise from positive emotions.

We don't suggest putting up happy posters, but companies can take steps to help people notice and share positive experiences. For example, how about starting a meeting with a review of what has gone well recently, rather than immediately jumping to what needs to be improved?

Summary

What's great about this exercise is the power it gives to each of us on a daily basis. Take a moment to reflect on the good things happening at work. ■

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