



## Living Your Best Life with MS

USING THE PRINCIPLES OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY TO MANAGE  
THE CHALLENGES OF LIVING WITH A CHRONIC ILLNESS

## The Principles of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology focuses on growth and well-being. While other branches of psychology tend to focus on dysfunction and abnormal behavior, positive psychology is centered on helping people thrive and become happier and more productive. Positive psychology does precisely the opposite of traditional modern psychology, focusing on what an individual *is* rather than what he or she *isn't*. At its core, positive psychology is the belief that people actively seek and inherently desire happiness. How that happiness plays out (whether through financial success; a fulfilling career; the upbringing of a family; love; stability; or freedom, for example) is different from person to person. In his research, Dr. Martin Seligman, a leader in the positive psychology movement, identified the positive personal strengths that move people toward their ideals of happiness: courage, social skills, a good work ethic, honesty, optimism, perseverance and hope. Positive psychology offers strategies to help people develop and enhance these personal strengths.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS IN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Some of the major findings of positive psychology include:

- People are generally happy.
- Some of the best ways to combat disappointments and setbacks include strong social relationships and character strengths.
- Work can be important to well-being, especially when people are able to engage in work that is purposeful and meaningful.
- While happiness is influenced by genetics, people can learn to be happier by developing optimism, gratitude and altruism. Money doesn't necessarily buy well-being; but spending money on other people can make individuals happier.



## APPLICATIONS OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Positive psychology can have a range of real-world applications in areas including education, therapy, self-help, stress management and workplace issues. Using strategies from positive psychology, teachers, coaches, therapists and employers can motivate others and help individuals understand and develop their personal strengths.

## WHY THIS PROGRAM NOW?

The *Everyday Matters* program was developed as a tool to assist people living with MS find those strategies to support ongoing happiness, even in the face of adversity.

### **We know:**

- MS can bring many challenges.
- MS can test even the best within us.
- MS can bring what can feel like a never-ending cycle of loss and grief, and learning a new normal.
- MS can be isolating and take us to a negative space where you may feel stuck.
- The principles of positive psychology work - happiness is at the center of success.

The goal is to get us to think about ways we can bring more happiness into our everyday lives by using simple and proven strategies – to provide the tools and resources to help reset our default.

*Everyday Matters: Living Your Best Life with MS* is supported by Genzyme, a Sanofi company.

## Overview of Select Principles of Positive Psychology

To deepen your understanding of the principles discussed, please visit [www.nationalMSSociety.org/everydayMSmatters](http://www.nationalMSSociety.org/everydayMSmatters) to view the related videos.

### HAPPINESS AS A HABIT = THE HAPPINESS ADVANTAGE

#### Key points:

- It is a misconception that success breeds happiness.
- Happiness is a choice.
- Waiting to be happy limits our potential for success.
- There is no single meaning for happiness. Happiness is relative to the person experiencing it; it's based on how we each feel about our own lives.

#### Proven ways to raise levels of happiness:

- Meditation
- Three gratitudes
- Journaling
- Finding something to look forward to
- Committing conscious acts of kindness
- Infusing positivity into your surroundings
- Exercising
- Spending money, but not on “stuff”
- Exercising a signature strength
- Others?

Choose one of the techniques above and commit to trying it until the next meeting.

**I choose:**

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## BUILDING YOUR COMMUNITY = SOCIAL INVESTMENT

### Key points:

- A common mistake: at the time when we need one another most, we let go of our most valuable resource: social support
- The most successful people take the exact opposite approach. Instead of turning inward they hold on tighter to their social support
- MS can be isolating. It is important to make sure that doesn't happen
- Research shows connections are core to happiness (for coping, friendship and support)
- Social relationships are the greatest single investment we can make

**I will reach out to \_\_\_\_\_ and reconnect or strengthen our relationship.**

## RETRAINING YOUR WAY OF THINKING

- ✓ **Adjusting Our Mindset** (The Fulcrum and the Lever)
- ✓ **Identifying Patterns of Possibility** (The Tetris Effect)
- ✓ **Success Through Resiliency** (Falling Up)

The common element in these three principles is that they all ask us to rethink how we look at challenges and adversity, and to connect with our own resilience.

### ADJUSTING OUR MINDSET = THE FULCRUM & THE LEVER

#### Key points:

- We can't change reality through sheer force of will alone. We can use our brain to change how we process (think about/react to) the world and that, in turn, changes how we react to it.
- Our brains are organized to act on what we predict will happen; you get what you perceive.
- The fulcrum = mindset = center point; by shifting this center point we can change our perceptions and, therefore, the outcomes.
- This is the time to call upon your strengths to help move the fulcrum.

**What are the top strengths you can build on?** If you're not sure go to [www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu) and take the Brief Strengths Test.

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**How can you use your strengths to change your perceptions and get things done?**

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## IDENTIFYING PATTERNS OF POSSIBILITY = THE TETRIS EFFECT

### Key points:

- Our brains easily get stuck in repetitious patterns of viewing the world. So when we are always looking for the negative, we get the negative.
- Think of those “Yes, but...” people you know – they always focus on what won’t work even when presented with positive, viable options.
- We need to retrain our brain to scan for good things.
- Instead of creating a pattern that looks for negatives and blocks success, flip the switch and scan the world for opportunities and ideas that allow success to grow.
- When our brains scan for and focus on the positive, we benefit from three of the most important tools available to us:
  - Happiness – the more you focus on the things that make you happy, the better you feel.
  - Gratitude – the more opportunities for positivity we see, the more grateful we become.
  - Optimism – the more the brain picks up on the positive, the more we expect it will continue.

Do you prescribe to negative thought patterns – like having a negative filter, jumping to the worst conclusion, worrying about the future? If so, think about ways you can substitute positive patterns – like having a positive lens or looking at the glass as half full. **One negative thought pattern I will work on to change is...**

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## SUCCESS THROUGH RESILIENCY = FALLING UP

### **Key points:**

- The human spirit is more resilient than we realize.
- For many of us, we need to go down before we go up and rebound from negative events.
- Challenges and setbacks are opportunities for growth (we can use them to our advantage) – it all comes down to what we make of the situation.
- Traumatic experiences can lead to positive growth.
- Define yourself by what you can make out of what has happened; do not define personal happiness by it.
- Positive growth can take many forms:
  - An increase in spirituality
  - An increase in compassion for others
  - Openness

**What have you learned from having MS that has made you a better or stronger person?**

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## REMOVING BARRIERS TO ACTION

- ✓ Building Out From a Smaller Center (The Zorro Circle)
- ✓ The Path of Least Resistance (The 20-Second Rule)

The common element in these two principles is they ask us to look at what gets in the way of achieving our personal goals, and they offer easy to use strategies to overcome obstacles.

### BUILDING OUT FROM A SMALLER CENTER = THE ZORRO CIRCLE

#### Key points:

- Often we are very lofty and grand in making goals – I will lose 25 pounds in one month, I will read the great novels over the next six months, etc. – think New Year’s resolutions.
- The vastness of the goal can be paralyzing, but by chunking out the big, overall goal into smaller, supportive goals, it becomes easier to reach the overall goal.
- Feeling more in control is one of the strongest drivers of well-being and performance.
- Setting smaller, more manageable goals helps us build our confidence, celebrate our forward progress and keeps us committed to the task at hand.
- Small successes can add up to major achievements; all it takes is drawing that first circle in the sand.

Think about a problem or challenge that feels overwhelming to you.

**What might the first step be to break it down into smaller, more manageable parts?**

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## THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE = THE 20-SECOND RULE

### **Key points:**

- Lowering the barrier to change (aka the activation energy) by just 20 seconds is all it takes to begin a new habit.
- The more we lower, or even eliminate, the activation energy for our desired actions, the more we enhance our ability to jumpstart positive change, particularly given the energy demands of MS and common symptom of fatigue.
- The 20-Second Rule isn't just about altering the time it takes to do things; limiting the choices we have to make also helps lower the barrier to positive change
- The less energy it takes to kick start a positive habit, the more likely the habit will stick.
- It takes 21 days to form a habit (you don't learn to juggle or play guitar overnight), so be patient.

**Is there anything you can do to help jumpstart something you want to do?**

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## KEEPING THE MOMENTUM GOING = THE RIPPLE EFFECT

### Key points:

- Once we start capitalizing on the principles of positive psychology, the positive changes quickly ripple out.
- Practicing the principles in our own lives can become our most effective tool for spreading positivity and ensuring that each person around us is spreading positivity too.
- The principles of positive psychology can have positive benefits for family members who are also living with the challenges MS can bring.
- Positive emotions are infectious, making them a powerful tool in our interpersonal relations.
- The happier everyone is around you, the happier you will become – and vice versa.

**How do you plan to share what you learned today with others in your circle of support?**

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## A Personal Call to Action

### ENGAGING WITH MY COMMUNITY

Everyone has their own idea of their best life. By using this plan, you can identify those action steps you want to take to create your own best life.

<b>Check mark</b>	<b><i>Using this action plan, I will...</i></b>	<b><i>Questions or ideas I have...</i></b>
	Stay connected. Volunteer with the National MS Society or other organizations that are important to me. I will ask others in my support community to join in.	
	Join others who want to make a difference. Become an MS Activist. Visit <a href="http://www.nationalMSSociety.org/get-involved/index.aspx">www.nationalMSSociety.org/get-involved/index.aspx</a> to learn how.	
	Become the voice of MS in my community as an activist and MS Ambassador. Call 1-800-344-4867 to learn how.	
	Join a professional networking group.	
	Engage with others around a hobby or interest I enjoy.	
	Identify new ways to stay connected with family and friends.	
	Start a team and join Walk MS. To learn more visit <a href="http://walkms.org">walkms.org</a> or call 1-800-344-4867.	
	Visit <a href="http://msconnection.org">msconnection.org</a> and join in on the conversation. Join or start a new group based on my interests.	
	Contact an MS Navigator at 1-800-344-4867 to learn more about how I can network and connect with others in the MS community.	
	Other:	

## Setting Personal Goals

### WORKSHEET

Setting personal goals is an important step in moving from information to transformation – you need to have a vision of what you are working toward.

S (specific)

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M (measurable)

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A (attainable)

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R (realistic)

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T (time-limited)

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## Select Resources to Learn More about Positive Psychology

### AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS ONLINE SELF- ASSESSMENTS [www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu)

Suggested Questionnaires:

- Brief Strengths Test – Measures 24 character strengths
- Authentic Happiness Inventory – Measures overall happiness
- Compassionate Love Scale – Measures your tendency to support, help and understand other people
- Approaches to Happiness – Measures three paths to happiness
- General Happiness – Assesses enduring happiness

### BOOKS

- *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* by Martin Seligman, PhD (2003)
- *The Happiness Advantage* by Shawn Achor (2010)

### ONLINE

- [www.everydayMSmatters.org](http://www.everydayMSmatters.org)
- The Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania ([www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu))
- Authentic Happiness Resource Projects ([www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/resources.aspx](http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/resources.aspx))
- <http://psychology.about.com/od/branchesofpsycholog1/a/positive-psychology.htm>

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