

Living Your Best Life with MS
SELF-HELP GROUP MEETING-IN-A-BOX TOOLKIT

EVERYDAY
MATTERS

FACILITATOR GUIDE



Acknowledgements

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MATERIALS

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Background

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 – it focuses 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.

REFERENCES

- The Practice of Positive Psychology (Positive Psychology: Helpful or Harmful?) by Marissa Brassfield (published: June 23, 2008)
- What is Positive Psychology? A Brief Overview of the Field of Positive Psychology (about.com)



SELECT RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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

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

Program Overview Living Your Best Life with MS

Phase one of *Everyday Matters* was an interactive, national project that uncovered stories of real people facing the everyday challenges that MS can bring on the path to one's best life. In addition to providing a platform – everydayMSmatters.org – that shared the stories of five participants with MS, the project provided participants and the greater MS community with connections and access to experts and tools, which they put to use in their own lives. In addition to the development and launch of an in-person workshop curriculum and self-help group meeting-in-a-box toolkit, multi-channel resources are available at everydayMSmatters.org, including:

- professional videos chronicling participant progress,
- participant journals, and
- online (video and other tutorials) and offline (printable self-assessments, worksheets).

Group Facilitator Notes

The *Everyday Matters* self-help group toolkit was designed to be a two-part meeting. The first meeting is about laying the groundwork with a discussion of the findings and tenets of positive psychology– *the why*. During the second meeting you and your group members will take an even deeper dive into the principles themselves – *the how* – asking group members to share how they are or will apply the principles to live their best life with MS. To keep the momentum going, as well as the commitment to increase personal happiness and well-being, you may want to begin subsequent meetings with a quick check in to find out which of the principles of positive psychology group members are using and how they are working.

As your group’s leader you may choose to facilitate the program or perhaps invite a guest speaker, such as a psychologist, mental health professional, social worker or life coach.

Additionally:

- One of the program’s key messages is that happiness is a choice, which undoubtedly many group members may not immediately accept. It is important to reiterate that change takes time and is not easy, and to refer to the successes and messages shared by the five participants in the first phase of the project.
- To deepen the learning and self-exploration processes for program participants, a number of online self-assessment tools and tests have been identified in the toolkit participant handout, and are offered as outside learning activities for group members.
- Due to the highly sensitive and emotional nature of the content being discussed you may find some group members require additional support to address the feelings they are experiencing. Since mental health counseling is outside the scope of your role as a self-help group leader, it is recommended you discuss the situation with the group member, with an offer to connect him/her with the chapter for follow-up.

Meeting One: Introduction to the Principles of Positive Psychology

DISCUSSION: WHAT IS POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY?

Suggested talking points

- Positive psychology is one of the newest branches of psychology.
- Simply put, while many other branches of psychology tend to focus on dysfunction and abnormal behavior, positive psychology is centered on helping people become happier.
- 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.

We know that:

- Happiness is actually a learned trait. It is a choice, and often a difficult one at that.
- Happiness is not just a mood; it's a work ethic.
- If we can change our mindset, and change the way we view what's going on in our world, we can raise our levels of happiness.
- What we need to do, though, is find out how we can make that choice more often.
- Focus on what you have, not on what you've lost – this is an important shift in mindset to make.
- Positive psychology is the study of what works, not just what is broken.

Ask group members to share any thoughts they have on what was presented.

Discuss how 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. 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.

Why this program now?

- We know MS can bring many challenges.
- We know MS can test even the best within us.

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- MS can bring what can feel like a never-ending cycle of loss and grief, and learning a new normal.
- We know MS can be isolating and take us to a negative space where you may feel stuck.
- We know the principles work and want to bring them to the larger MS community. Happiness is at the center of success.
- We want to provide the tools and skillset to find a place of control in what may not always be controllable circumstances.

Discuss the objectives of the meeting-in-a-box toolkit

- Through a high-level overview and discussion, the group will begin to explore the use of the principles of positive psychology to address the everyday challenges of living with MS.
- This program is about asking all of us to change the way we look at happiness generating behaviors and habits – how to find happiness when we don't think we can.
- For many people, we will be taking them outside their comfort zone to explore new ideas. We ask that everyone have an open mind to what we will be learning.

DISCUSSION: HOW DO WE SHIFT FROM FOCUSING ON THE NEGATIVE TO LOOKING AT THE POSITIVE?

Over the course of the meeting we are going to discuss strategies that get us to more positive habits. The keys to permanent, positive change (habits) are:

- Creating habits that automatically show positive results without using much energy or willpower
- Practicing habits until they become automatic rituals in everyday life

Suggested discussion questions

- Why is changing behavior so hard?
- What can we do to make changing behaviors easier?

Now let's hear more about the principles of positive psychology. **On the *Everyday Matters* program DVD, show: Chapter 2 (*The Happiness Advantage*) and Chapter 1 (Finale).**

Ask the group if there was any one message that resonated with them on a personal level after watching the video.



DISCUSSION: PRINCIPLES OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

If you have time, you may want to show select chapters from the toolkit DVD to jumpstart conversation:

- Chapter 3 Social Investment
- Chapter 4 The Fulcrum & the Lever
- Chapter 5 The Tetris Effect
- Chapter 6 Falling Up
- Chapter 7 The Zorro Circle
- Chapter 8 The 20-Second Rule

Group members can watch these videos on their own at: www.nationalMSSociety.org/everydayMSmatters

Suggested talking points

Key messages of the seven principles addressed in the *Everyday Matters* program (refer group members to the participant handout):

- Change is possible. Utilizing these principles can make a real, lasting difference in our lives.
- Principles can create change even in personal crisis.
- Not everything we discuss will work for you, but that doesn't mean you should give up trying to find what does.

DISCUSSION: HAPPINESS AS A HABIT (AKA THE HAPPINESS ADVANTAGE)

Ask the group to share their personal definition of happiness. Ask if this definition has changed since diagnosis and in what ways.

Suggested talking 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.

There are a number of proven ways to raise levels of happiness (refer group members to the participant handout)

- 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
- What else?

Not all of what is listed above will resonate with everyone, so be sure to elicit additional responses. What is important is finding the activity that fits the person.

Suggested discussion questions

- Has anyone used any of these strategies prior to coming to the meeting? If yes, what are their experiences?
- Which of the strategies resonate most with individual group members?

DISCUSSION: BUILDING YOUR COMMUNITY (AKA SOCIAL INVESTMENT)

Suggested talking 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.

DISCUSSION: RE-TRAINING YOUR WAY OF THINKING (AKA THE FULCRUM & THE LEVER, TETRIS EFFECT, AND FALLING UP)

These three principles ask us to rethink how we look at challenges and adversity, and to connect with our own resilience.

The Fulcrum & the Lever – Suggested talking 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.

Tetris Effect – Suggested talking points

- Ever played Tetris for a while? When you're done, you see shapes everywhere? Why is this? (Note to facilitator: you or a group member may need to explain what the Tetris video game is.)
- 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.

Falling Up – Suggested talking 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

DISCUSSION: REMOVING THE BARRIERS (AKA THE ZORRO CIRCLE AND 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.

The Zorro Circle – Suggested talking 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. This kind of manageable goal-setting is ultimately more successful and empowering.
- 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.

The 20-Second Rule – Suggested talking 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 please be patient.

DISCUSSION: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER AND MEETING WRAP-UP

Suggested talking points

- The principles we've discussed don't work in isolation. They are linked -- and using several together only enhances their collective power.
 - Example- The Tetris Effect fuels Falling Up because training ourselves to scan the world for positives can help us reinterpret failures as opportunities.
 - Example- Social Investment can help us master the 20 second rule, since our support network encourages us and holds us accountable to new habits.
- The effects of one principle become the trigger for another so that they become far more than just the sum of their parts.

Ask group to share other examples of how the principles relate to and play into each other.

DISCUSSION: KEEPING THE MOMENTUM GOING – THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Suggested Talking 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.

Ask the group for examples on how they could share the principles of positive psychology with family, friends, co-workers – others in their community of support.

For group members interested in learning more about the field of positive psychology, please refer them to the participant handout. Group members may also want to contact their chapter to find out if an in-person *Everyday Matters: Living Your Best Life with MS* program is being offered in their community.

LEARNING ASSIGNMENT:

- 1) **Ask each of your group members to agree to make one change** between today's meeting and the next, and be prepared to discuss at that time.
- 2) **There are a number of proven ways to raise levels of happiness.** Refer group members to the participant handout, and ask that they select one of the techniques and commit to trying it for one month:
 - Meditation
 - Three gratitudes
 - Journaling
 - Finding something to look forward to
 - Committing conscious acts of kindness
 - Infusing positivity into your surroundings

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- Exercising
- Spending money, but not on “stuff”
- Exercising a signature strength
- What else?

Not all of what is listed above will resonate with everyone, so be sure to elicit additional responses. What is important is finding the activity that fits the person.

Meeting Two: Applying the Principles in Real Life

To deepen the conversation on – and personal exploration of – the relationship between specific principles of positive psychology and living with MS, please refer to the suggested talking points and discussion questions below.

At the beginning of the meeting, ask group members to share the happiness technique they chose to work on at the first meeting and how they have been applying it in daily life. Did anyone change the technique selected and why?

FOR: BUILDING YOUR COMMUNITY

Show Chapter 3 (Social Investment) from the *Everyday Matters* program DVD.

Suggested talking 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.

Suggested discussion questions (refer group to the Call to Action in the participant handout)

- Where do you find your social support?
- What qualities do you look for in a social support network?
- What are the benefits of a support network?
- Has your network changed since diagnosis? How?
- Who makes up your support team?
- Do you find support through online communities?
- How can we use this group as a social support network?

FOR: RETRAINING YOUR WAY OF THINKING

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

These three principles ask us to rethink how we look at challenges and adversity, and to connect with our own resilience.

Principle: Adjusting our mindset (aka The Fulcrum & the Lever)

Show Chapter 4 (The Fulcrum & the Lever) from the *Everyday Matters* program DVD.

Suggested talking 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.

Principle: Identifying patterns of possibility, seeing the not-so-hidden opportunities (aka The Tetris Effect)

Show Chapter 5 (The Tetris Effect) from the *Everyday Matters* program DVD.

Suggested talking points

- Ever played Tetris for a while? When you're done, you see shapes everywhere? Why is this? (Note to facilitator: you or a group member may need to explain what the Tetris video game is.)
- 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.

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- 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.

Principle: Moving from challenge to success through resiliency (aka Falling Up)

Show Chapter 6 (Falling Up) from the *Everyday Matters* program DVD.

Suggested talking 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

Ask for volunteers to share how these three principles are applicable to living a life with MS. Ask the group how living with MS has led them toward more personal growth.

FOR: REMOVING BARRIERS TO ACTION

- The Zorro Circle
- 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.

Principle: Building out from a smaller center (aka The Zorro Circle)

Show Chapter 7 (The Zorro Circle) from the *Everyday Matters* program DVD.

Suggested talking 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. This kind of manageable goal-setting is ultimately more successful and empowering.
- 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 keep 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.

Goal Setting – Suggested talking points

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. One effective tool to set personal goals is called SMART (refer group members to the participant handout for the SMART worksheet)

- S (specific)
- M (measurable)
- A (attainable)
- R (realistic)
- T (time-limited)

Ask for volunteers to share if anyone has used this, or a similar, goal-setting strategy in the past and how the strategy worked for them personally.

Principle: The Path of Least Resistance (aka The 20-Second Rule)

Show Chapter 8 (The 20-Second Rule) from the *Everyday Matters* program DVD.

Suggested talking points

- Lowering the barrier to change (aka the activation energy) by just 20 seconds is all it takes to form 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 make a habit (you don't learn to juggle or play guitar overnight), so please be patient.

Ask if anyone has used the 20-Second Rule prior to the meeting. If yes, what was the challenge and solution?