

Focus on the Positive:
Enhancing Resilience by
Savoring Positive Experiences

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EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

Positive emotions contribute to greater resilience and psychological well-being, and they can be increased by savoring positive experiences. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a one-week intervention on increasing older adults' ability to savor positive experiences, and to assess the impact that the intervention had on their resilience and psychological well-being.

The study included 106 older adults who completed a one-week intervention in which they were asked to focus on positive experiences twice a day. Participants completed a survey before and after the intervention that measured their savoring ability, resilience, and psychological well-being (e.g., happiness, depression, and satisfaction with life).

Overall, the intervention proved effective at reducing older adults' tendencies to engage in thoughts and behaviors that dampen their ability to savor positive experiences. There was some variation in the effectiveness for some participants, which suggests that some people may need more time to develop the ability to savor positive experiences. Participants who completed the intervention for six or seven days reported higher resilience, less stress, and lower depression compared to people who completed the intervention for fewer days. Older adults who reported an increase in their ability to savor positive experiences after the intervention reported higher levels of resilience, happiness, and satisfaction with life, as well as lower levels of stress and depression.

ISSUE IN FOCUS

How can we increase the resilience of older adults? One often overlooked source of resilience is the positive experiences in their lives and the emotional well-being that comes from those experiences. We conducted a research study to test the effects of an intervention (or activity) designed to increase older adults' ability to savor positive experience and the impact of savoring on their resilience and psychological well-being.

BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Positive emotions and happiness are associated with benefits in many aspects of our lives (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Positive emotions are related to better mental health, including lower levels of anxiety and depression. There's also a strong link between happiness and our physical health. For instance, people who report greater happiness display better immune system functioning. After being exposed to cold or flu viruses, people who reported higher levels of happiness were less likely to get sick compared to people who experienced lower levels of happiness (Cohen, Alper, Doyle, Treanor, & Turner, 2006). And if they did become ill, happier people tended to recover faster than others. Positive emotions are also beneficial for our relationships. Happier people tend to have stronger social support networks and greater relationship satisfaction.



Figure 1. Positive Emotions Enhance Resilience

Positive emotions are also important because they enhance our resilience (Fredrickson & Cohn, 2008). When people are in a positive mood, they are more open to new experiences and willing to try new things. As a result, people develop new skills and resources and build stronger relationships. In turn, these experiences generate more positive feelings, and this creates a self-perpetuating upward spiral. (See Figure 1.) When challenging situations arise, people who experience more positive emotions are able to respond more resiliently because they have a deeper set of resources to draw upon.

As we grow older, our ability to manage our emotions tends to improve (Urry & Gross, 2010). There are several possible reasons why this may occur. Older adults have more experience controlling their emotions and they may be more in tune with what makes them happy. In addition, our perception of time changes as we age and we begin to place greater emphasis on socioemotional goals. When given a choice of who they could spend time with during a research study, older adults tended to prioritize spending time with someone they were familiar with and emotionally connected to, whereas younger adults preferred to meet someone new (Fredrickson & Carstensen, 1990). Finally, older adults recover more slowly from the physiological effects of stress and negative emotions, such as elevated blood pressure (Charles, 2010). As a result, there are advantages to minimizing exposure to negative information. By capitalizing upon older adults' ability to manage their emotions, an intervention designed to enhance this population's ability to savor positive experiences may help build greater resilience through an increase in positive emotions.

SAVOR POSITIVE EXPERIENCES TO INCREASE POSITIVE EMOTIONS

We can increase our positive emotions by improving our ability to savor positive experiences. Savoring enhances our awareness and appreciation of positive experiences (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). By savoring positive experiences, people are able to capitalize upon the experience and draw the most benefits from them. Savoring increases the awareness, intensity, and duration of positive feelings. Some people are better able to savor positive experiences than others; for instance, women and people who are more extroverted tend to report a greater ability to savor positive experiences (Bryant, 2003; Bryant & Veroff, 2007).

Although it may sound simple, we don't always fully appreciate the positive events in our lives. There are challenges that get in the way of our enjoyment of positive experiences. Sometimes

we are so focused on the issues of the day that we don't notice the good things around us. The benefits of a positive experience may be short-lived because we easily become accustomed to it. For instance, a person who moves to a warmer climate may initially bask in the sunshine and fully appreciate the better weather; however, over time, the person is likely to become less aware of the warmer climate and draw less enjoyment from it. Finally, we don't always set aside time to intentionally focus on our happiness and emotional well-being.

During positive experiences, we can respond in ways that *amplify* or increase our positive emotions and enjoyment (amplifying strategies) or in ways that *dampen* or suppress our positive emotions and limit enjoyment (dampening strategies). (See Figure 2.) Examples of amplifying strategies include sharing good news with another person, cheering or clapping, and intentionally paying close attention to details of a positive experience. In contrast, examples of dampening strategies are distracting oneself by thinking about something else, focusing on negative aspects of the situation, and imagining how the positive experience could have been better. People who use amplifying strategies during positive experiences tend to report higher levels of satisfaction with life and positive affect, and people who use dampening strategies tend to report lower satisfaction with life and positive affect (Quoidbach, Berry, Hansenne, & Mikolajczak, 2010).

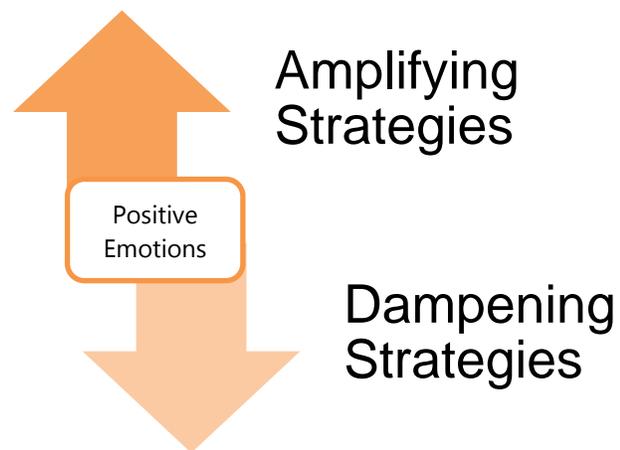


Figure 2. Amplifying and Dampening Positive Emotions

In the current study, we developed and tested an intervention (or activity) designed to increase older adults' ability to savor positive experiences. Increasing older adults' ability to savor positive experiences was expected to contribute to higher levels of resilience and increased psychological well-being. The following sections describe how we carried out the study, the key findings from the study, and implications of the findings for the senior living and aging services field.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to develop and test a positive intervention aimed at increasing older adults’ ability to savor positive experiences and, ultimately, enhance their resilience and well-being. The study investigated the following research questions:

- Is the positive intervention (i.e., savoring activity) effective at increasing older adults’ ability to savor positive experiences?
- What is the effect of the positive intervention on the resilience and psychological well-being of older adults?

HOW WAS THE STUDY CONDUCTED?

Adults age 60 or better were invited to participate in a week-long study on the impact of making small changes to their daily life. (See Figure 3.) First, participants completed a baseline survey that assessed their ability to savor positive experiences (i.e., savoring beliefs and strategies that amplify or dampen responses to positive experiences), resilience and perceived stress, psychological well-being (i.e., happiness, depression, and satisfaction with life), and demographic information. (See details about each measure in the Related Resources section.)

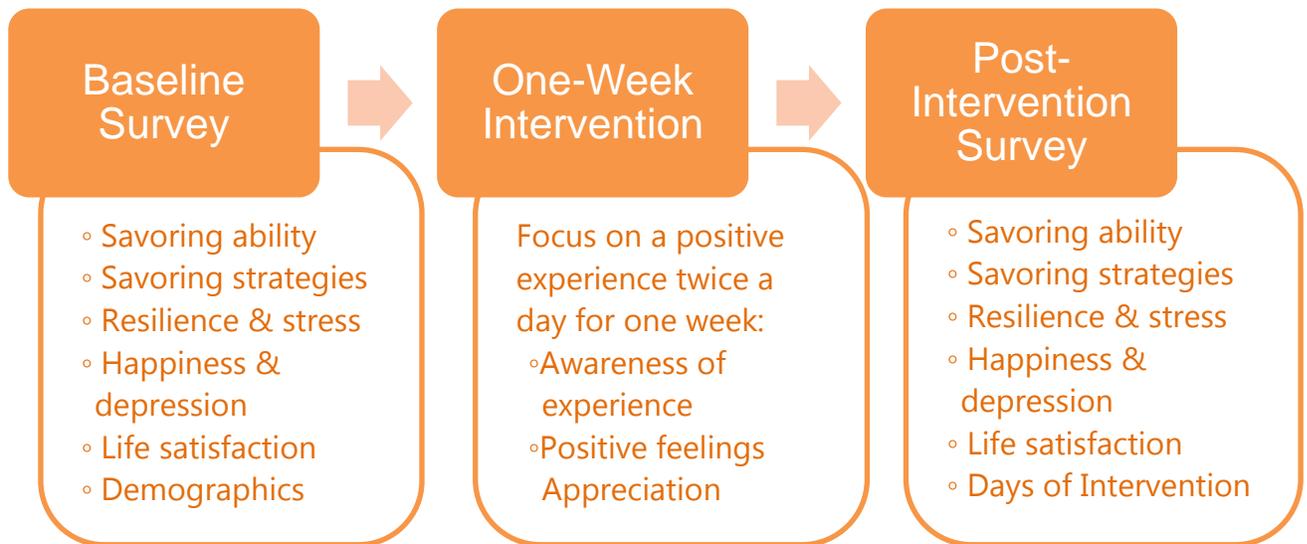


Figure 3. Study Procedures

Immediately after the baseline survey, participants received instructions for the intervention. They were asked to focus on positive experiences using the following three steps:

First, think of something positive (something good that's happening right now, a pleasant memory, or something positive that will happen in the future). Next, notice the positive feelings that occur when you think about the experience (e.g., amusement, interest, excitement, contentment). Finally, take a moment to appreciate the experience. Think about how special the experience is and how grateful you are for it.

Participants were instructed to complete the activity twice a day for one week—five minutes in the morning and five minutes in the evening. At the end of the week, participants completed a post-intervention survey that included the same measures as the baseline survey as well as two additional measures assessing how often participants completed the intervention.

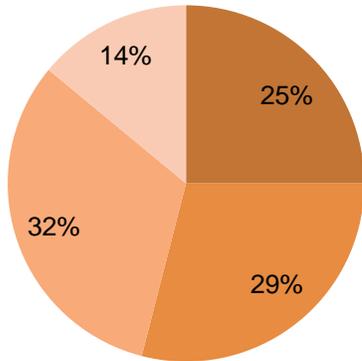
WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE STUDY?

Responses from 106 older adults who completed all of the study activities were included in the analyses (i.e., the pre-test and post-test surveys and at least one day of the positive intervention). Here is a description of the most common characteristics of participants in this study:

- **Age.** Ages of the participants ranged from 60 to 93, and the average age was 78.
- **Gender.** The majority of participants were female (85%).
- **Ethnicity.** Participants were primarily Caucasian/European American (72%) or African American (25%).
- **Education.** Approximately three-fourths of participants obtained a degree beyond a high school education (i.e., associate's degree, 10%; bachelor's degree, 23%; and graduate degree or equivalent, 41%).
- **Household Income.** A little over half of the respondents reported annual household incomes under \$50,000 (54%), nearly one-third reported incomes from \$50,000 to less than \$100,000 (32%), and the remaining respondent-reported incomes over \$100,000 (14%). (See Figure 4.)

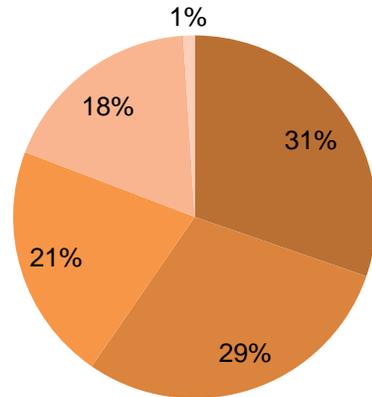
- **Marital Status.** Out of every 10 participants, approximately three were married, three were divorced, two were widowed, and two were unmarried. (See Figure 4.)

Annual Household Income



- Less than \$25,000
- \$25,000-\$49,999
- \$50,000-\$99,999
- Greater than \$100,000

Marital Status



- Married
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Unmarried
- Domestic Partner

Figure 4. Income and Marital Status

KEY FINDINGS

AFTER ONE WEEK, PARTICIPANTS “DAMPENED” POSITIVE EXPERIENCES LESS

Comparing scores before and after the intervention, participants reported a statistically significant decrease in the use of dampening behaviors during positive experiences. In other words, older adults reported *decreases* in behaviors that limit their ability to savor positive experiences, such as:

- I reminded myself how transient this moment was—I thought about it ending.
- I reminded myself that it would be over before I knew it.
- I reminded myself that nothing good lasts forever.

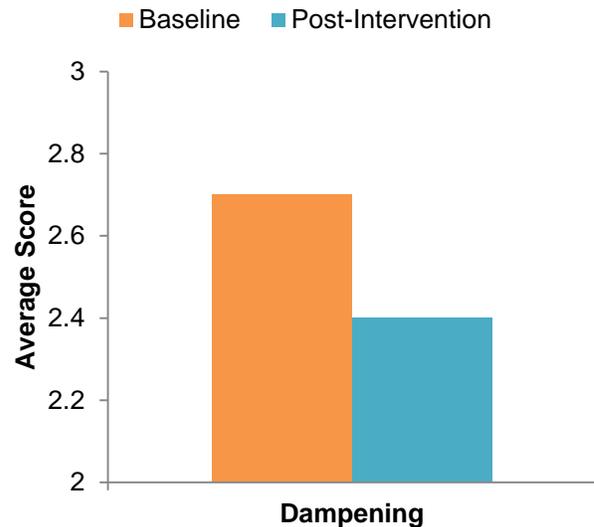


Figure 5. Change in Dampening Scores after Intervention

There were no significant changes in the use of amplifying behaviors during positive experiences or in participants’ beliefs about their ability to savor positive experiences.

Overall, the positive intervention was effective at increasing people’s ability to savor by reducing their tendency to dampen their responses during positive experiences, but there was not an increase in amplifying behaviors.

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE INTERVENTION VARIED

Participants reported their ability to savor positive experiences before and after the intervention. Change in savoring ability was calculated by subtracting each person’s baseline savoring ability score from his or her post-intervention savoring ability score. After one week, half of the participants reported an increase in their ability to savor positive experiences (51%), 7% reported no change, and 42% reported a decrease in savoring ability.

Why do some older adults report an increase in savoring ability while others report a decrease? Additional analyses were conducted to compare people who displayed an increase in savoring abilities with people who displayed a decrease in savoring abilities. Before the intervention, there were no differences between the two groups on savoring ability, stress, resilience, satisfaction with life, depression, or use of dampening strategies during positive experiences. However, older adults with increased savoring abilities did report significantly higher happiness before the intervention. They also displayed greater use of amplifying strategies before the intervention. (See side bar.)

Participants who reported an increase in savoring abilities tended to amplify or enhance positive experiences before the intervention in the following ways:

I thought about sharing the memory of this later with other people.

I reminded myself how lucky I was to have this good thing happen to me.

I looked for other people to share it with.

These findings suggest that the positive intervention was a better fit for some people's personality and interests than for others. It is likely that older adults who are more optimistic or who have a more positive affective disposition were more engaged in the activity. In addition, some participants may find it easier to notice and appreciate positive experiences in their lives. Participants who had difficulty with the daily activity may have become more aware of ways that they have not been fully appreciating positive experiences, and this could have contributed to the lower savoring ability scores.

Another important point to keep in mind was that participants only completed the positive activity for one week. It is likely that one week was not long enough for all of the participants to become adept at savoring positive experiences, particularly for people who are not inclined to do this type of activity. The research intervention lasted for one week, but this type of positive intervention is intended to be implemented for longer periods of time in real life.

INCREASE IN SAVORING ABILITY CONTRIBUTES TO GREATER RESILIENCE AND WELL-BEING

What impact did the intervention have on older adults’ resilience and psychological well-being? To answer this question, we examined the relationship between changes in savoring abilities and post-intervention scores on the outcome measures (controlling for baseline scores).

There was a statistically significant relationship between changes in savoring ability and post-intervention resilience. In other words, older adults whose savoring scores increased after the intervention also reported higher resilience. An increase in savoring ability was also associated with significantly lower reports of stress after the intervention.

Increases in savoring ability were related to improvements in psychological well-being. Specifically, participants who reported increases in savoring ability displayed significantly greater satisfaction with life after the one-week intervention. (See Figure 6.) Increases in savoring ability were also related to significantly greater happiness and lower depression after the intervention.

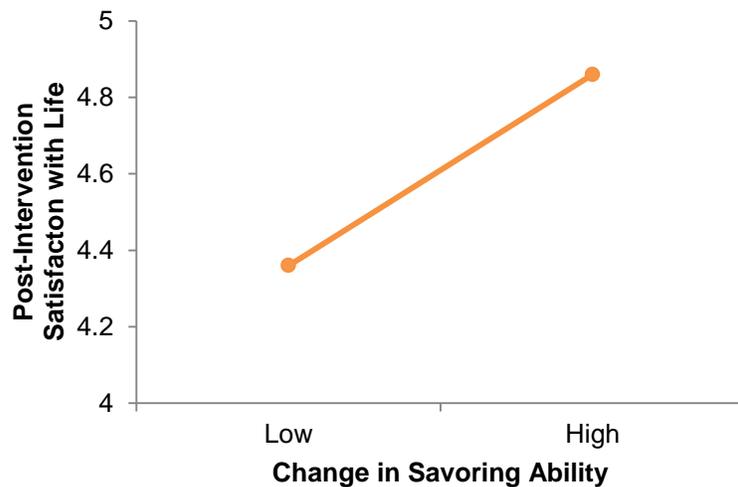


Figure 6. Increased Savoring Ability Predicts Greater Satisfaction with Life

Overall, older adults who reported an increase in savoring ability tended to display increases in resilience and psychological well-being (higher happiness and satisfaction with life and lower depression) after the intervention.

HIGHER DOSAGE OF POSITIVE INTERVENTION LED TO GREATER BENEFITS

Do people who completed the intervention for more days show more favorable outcomes?

Overall, participants completed the positive intervention for an average of 5.7 days and 23

minutes per day, but the amount of time that participants spent on the positive activity varied. Nearly two-thirds of participants completed the intervention for six or seven days (63%) and the remaining participants completed the intervention from one to five days.

Additional analyses were conducted to compare well-being outcomes for people who received a “high dosage” of the positive intervention (six or more days) with people who received a “low dosage” (five or fewer days). In these analyses, we controlled for baseline scores and looked at differences in the post-intervention outcome scores.

Older adults who completed a high dosage of the savoring intervention displayed significantly higher resilience. (See Figure 7.) High (vs. low) dosages of the intervention also contributed to significantly lower stress and lower depression. Satisfaction with life and happiness scores did not differ for people who completed a high vs. low dosage of the intervention.

These findings suggest that greater exposure to the positive intervention is related to increases in psychological well-being, and continuing the intervention may prolong and potentially increase these benefits. As with exercise and meditation, savoring positive experiences is a skill that can be increased, and the effects of the intervention are expected to build up over time.

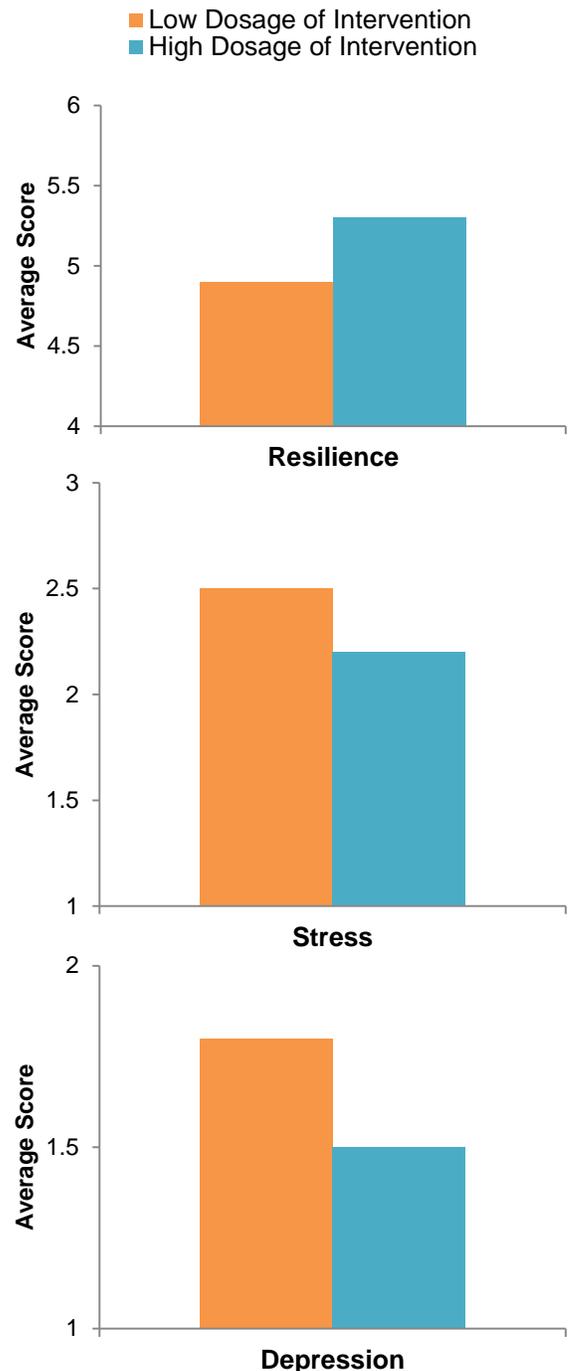


Figure 7. Comparison of Outcomes for Low vs. High Dosage of Intervention

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES TO INCREASE HAPPINESS

Programs designed to enhance older adults' positive emotions (and ultimately, their resilience and psychological well-being) should be tailored to fit the interests and abilities of the program recipients. Keep the following strategies in mind when developing programs and activities to increase positive emotions:

- **Include activities that increase older adults' awareness of positive experiences.** In our daily lives, we tend to focus on problems that need our attention and the list of tasks we need to complete. We need to make an effort to shift our awareness to positive experiences. Noticing positive aspects of a situation is a skill that can be developed with practice.
- **Introduce new components to the programs.** Just as our appreciation of moving to a warmer climate decreases over time, the effectiveness of the programs will decrease if the experience becomes too routine. Encourage older adults to try new activities or to look at familiar experiences in new ways (e.g., noticing details that they may have overlooked before). Sharing positive experiences with other people, through photographs or storytelling, can help us see the experience in a new way.
- **Continue the activities over time.** Because people easily become accustomed to situations that they are in, it is important that activities aimed at increase people's positive emotions are conducted consistently over time. Designing one event to increase older adults' happiness can be effective in the short term, but prolonged efforts are needed to maintain increases in positive emotions and build greater resilience.
- **Tailor strategies for individuals.** It is important to acknowledge that it's unlikely that one activity will work for all individuals. Some people have differences in their natural tendency to savor positive experiences. People also differ in how in-tune they are with their emotions and how observant they are of the world around them. Some individuals may benefit most from having the savoring strategies modeled for them (e.g., having others point out good things that are happening for them).

WAYS TO INCORPORATE SAVORING STRATEGIES INTO SENIOR LIVING SERVICES

There are many different ways to incorporate strategies that enhance older adults' ability to savor positive experiences into senior living and aging services:

- Incorporate savoring activities into existing programs, such as meditation, yoga, and group discussions. Provide participants with an opportunity to pay attention to positive experiences in their lives and to share the experience with others.
- Create art projects around the expression of positive experiences.
- Encourage residents to document positive experiences from their lives in photographs and stories. These records could then be shared with family members and friends.
- For resident directories or new resident orientation materials, ask residents to share a positive memory. What did they enjoy most about the experience?
- Train employees on communication strategies that encourage older adults to savor positive experiences (e.g., intentionally mention something positive that is happening at the community that day or in the resident's life, or encourage them to elaborate on positive comments).
- Train employees—or have them participate in activities—to increase their own positive emotions, resilience, and emotional well-being.

Small changes that encourage older adults to savor positive experiences more can make a big difference over time. Rather than focusing on negative aspects of a situation, people can learn to adopt a savoring mindset that enables them to notice and appreciate positive experiences that are happening around them. Increasing positive emotions through savoring can lead to greater long-term resilience and psychological well-being.

RELATED RESOURCES

MEASURES

The following scales were included in the baseline and post-activity surveys:

- Savoring ability was measured using the 24-item Savoring Beliefs Inventory (Bryant, 2003).
- Thoughts and behaviors that people engage in to amplify or dampen their emotions during positive experiences were measured using an adapted 19-item version of the Ways of Savoring Checklist (Bryant & Veroff, 2007)
- Happiness was measured using the four-item Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999)
- Satisfaction with life was measured using the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985).
- Symptoms of depression were measured using a 10-item version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies - Depression Scale (CES-D).
- Stress over the past week was measured using the four-item Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1983).
- Ability to bounce back after stressful events was measured using the six-item Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008).

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