

# **Lauren Maher**

## **Happiness consultancy report**

**CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”**

**Autumn session, 2015**

**Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong**

**Subject coordinators: Chris Barker and Brian Martin**

### ***Assignment***

The consultancy is a continuation of your reflective journal.

- You continue with the activity you used for your journal, or a different one, and/or an additional one.
- You recruit two or more individuals — called clients — to undertake an activity known to increase happiness, either the same activity as your own or a different one.
- You introduce your clients to the activity, for example through a presentation, talk, workshop and/or handout.
- You monitor their engagement with the activity on a regular basis (at least weekly) through observations, interviews, survey and/or other means.
- You evaluate the effect of the activity on yourself and your clients using questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and/or other techniques.

For more details see [http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/CST\\_15outline.pdf](http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/CST_15outline.pdf)

*Lauren Maher's* consultancy report starts on the next page.

This document is located at <http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/happiness-consultancy-tops/>.

**Title:** Happiness Consultancy Report

**Student Number:** 4\*\*\*\*\*3

**Subject Code:** CST228

**Subject Title:** Happiness: Investigating its Cause and Conditions

**Tutor:** Brian Martin

**Submitted:** 5<sup>th</sup> June 2015

**Word Count:** 2,551 words

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## **Introduction**

Happiness is seen as frequent positive affect, infrequent negative affect as well as high life satisfaction. Increasing one's happiness is often an important goal for many individuals (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade 2005, pp.111-115). Many studies have found that there is a positive relationship between optimism and an individual's happiness (Reivich 2010a; Reivich 2010b; Carver, Scheier & Segerstrom 2010; Patnaik 2013; Seligman 2006; Scheier & Carver 1993). As a result individuals who engage in activities involving optimism often report increased happiness (Lyubomirsky 2010, pp. 103-104) Optimism is the expectation that situations will turn out well (Reivich 2010b, p. 25). Therefore, optimists expect good things to happen to them, believe they have the ability to control their lives, and perceive setbacks as temporary. While, pessimists expect bad things to happen to them, negative situations will last a long time, undermine everything they do and perceive mishaps as their own fault (Reivich 2010b, p.25; Carver et al. 2010, p. 880; Seligman 2006, pp.4-5).

This report examines academic research on optimism in relation to individual experiences with optimism. In order to do this a four-week study was conducted with two clients as well as myself, where positive thinking was undertaken. This report will contain seven sections: firstly, the chosen activity; secondly, how the clients were recruited; thirdly a brief client background; fourthly, how the clients were monitored and evaluated; fifthly, an analysis of how academic research relates to client's as well as my experiences; sixthly, the benefits and disadvantages of the activity; and finally, recommendations will be given.

## **The Chosen Activity**

During, the five-week reflective journal I chose to undertake cultivating optimism through positive thinking as I often have many negative thoughts and tend to focus and become quite overwhelmed by these thoughts. Positive thinking assisted me in seeing the positive of situations and improved my happiness marginally. As a result, I thought it would be beneficial to see whether I could improve my happiness further by continuing this activity for four more weeks. As I am continuing with positive thinking I also decided to continue with the way I had previously conducted positive thinking, which was to record my negative thoughts and how I turned them into positive thoughts in a daily diary, as it was an easy way to record my thoughts and feelings.

The activity I chose for my clients to participate in for four weeks was also positive thinking as I thought it would be interesting to gather information about how other people would experience this activity, since I found this activity beneficial. I also asked my clients to keep a diary describing their negative thoughts and how they turned them into positives. These diaries are completely private, so my clients can have the freedom to express themselves without being worried that they would be judged or treated unfairly. I decided to keep the clients activity as close to what I was doing as possible so I would be able to provide solutions or some advice that worked for me, which a client could try if they wished if they were struggling with some aspect of the activity such as turning negative thoughts into positives.

## **Recruitment**

To recruit individuals for my happiness consultancy report I made a list, which consisted of family and friends who I thought might be interested in participating in the activity. I then got in contact with the people on the list through various methods

of communication such as in person, phone call or through Facebook. During these conversations I just stated I was conducting an activity, which was a part of an assignment. Also during these conversations I gave them a detailed information sheet in order to introduce them to the activity, with what would be required of them if they were to participate such as a daily diary, and weekly interviews (see Appendix A1). I also handed out the information sheet provided by Brian Martin so they were able to get a full idea of the activity (see Appendix A2). After handing them the two information sheets I asked them to have a read of the sheets in order to make an informed decision about whether they would like to participate or not and then let me know if they would like to participate. Two people—Jenny and Samantha—responded saying they would be willing to participate. After they agreed to participate I got them to sign consent forms (see Appendix B).

### **Client Background**

Jenny is a 56 year old Head Teacher at Mount Annan High School, which is located in the Macarthur region. Jenny has a very busy and time-consuming job as a Head Teacher. She feels she is a relatively happy person. Her happiness scores reflect this, with average scores of 4.8 for the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) and 4.3 for the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ). She often directs her negative thoughts and feelings into other activities. Jenny undertook this activity in order to improve how she deals with things mentally.

Samantha is a 22 year old full-time University student at the University of Wollongong and part time worker at a local fruit market. Samantha has a very busy schedule with both university and part-time work. She feels she is not a relatively happy person and her happiness is not the best it could be possibly due to the fact she feels lost in her physical fitness. Samantha also states she has a rather negative way of

thinking and feels rather stuck in life. Her happiness scores reflect this, with relatively low scores of 3.5 for the SHS and 2.2 for the OHQ. Samantha undertook this activity in order to help a friend out with an assessment and to try and improve her thinking processes.

### **Evaluation and Monitoring of Experience**

To monitor my clients I conducted a structured interview at the end of every week. During these interviews I would ask them to talk about how they are finding the activity as well as to describe one negative thought that they had written in their diary that they were willing to share and how they turned it around into a positive thought, in order to gain their experiences and to ensure that they were participating. I would ask my clients how their negative and positive thoughts affected their emotions, mood and happiness (Full list of questions provided in Appendix C). These interviews were conducted through communication methods, which were easiest for my clients. For example, Jenny's interviews were conducted through email, while Samantha's interviews were conducted through Facebook. I allowed the clients to choose a method of communication, which suited them in order to make them feel more comfortable during these interviews and to fit around their busy schedules. The answers provided during these interviews were recorded in my diary, along with my daily entries about my negative and positive thoughts.

These interviews were also used to evaluate my clients' experiences. Questions such as: how are you finding the activity, and why, as well as what did you enjoy the most about the activity, were asked during these interviews to evaluate their experiences. The responses to these questions were then analysed in order to gain an overall perspective of their experiences.

Another method used to evaluate my clients' experiences was happiness questionnaires. I used two questionnaires during this activity to gain an in-depth perspective of my clients' as well as my own happiness—the OHQ developed by Argyle and Hills (see Appendix D) as well as the SHS developed by Lyubomirsky (see Appendix D). These questionnaires were administered once, at the beginning of the activity and a final time at the end of the activity. The scores from these questionnaires were used to evaluate how effective, positive thinking was in improving my clients' happiness. These questionnaires were also used to evaluate my own experiences to determine whether continuing with positive thinking would increase my happiness further, which is currently average with a score of 4.5 on the SHS and 4.3 on the OHQ.

### **Academic Research and Experience**

Optimism has been found to alter an individual's mindset, widen their scope of attention, and reduces cortisol levels. An individual's longevity also increases due to increased immunity and decreased stress (Patnaik 2013, pp.124-125; Saleem 2014, p. 86). In various medical and challenging contexts such as coronary bypass surgery, cancer patient caregivers, and starting college, optimism has been found to decrease distress and depression (Carver et al. 2010, pp. 881-882). While, pessimism has been linked to helplessness, and has been found to cause feelings such as anxiety, guilt, anger, despair and sadness as well as turning small setbacks into catastrophes (Seligman 2006, pp. 5-8; Mishra 2013, pp. 75-76). Over the past four-weeks both Samantha and I have noticed that optimistic thinking can alter a person's mindset. For example, Samantha had stated during an interview that positive thinking allowed an outlet for her to rid her mind of negative thoughts, which allowed her to think more optimistically. Also during this four-week period I have experienced a decrease in my



stress, however my clients did not. For example, in a diary entry I had written about how stressed and annoyed I was that I was not receiving an answer to a question about an assignment but through the use of positive thinking I was able to realise that I can always do another assignment while I wait for a response, which allowed me to reduce my stress levels and stop being so annoyed. Both my clients and I over the past four-weeks have also found that pessimistic thinking causes negative emotions such as anger, sadness, and anxiousness, and that optimistic thinking can alleviate these distressing emotions.

Optimism has also been found to increase resilience, as it enables an individual to thrive despite setbacks, and hardships. Optimism also influences how people cope with adversity (Reivich 2010b, p. 25; Patnaik 2013, p. 125; Scheier & Carver 1993, p. 27). Optimists also engage in effective and active coping methods such as problem-focused coping (Lyubomirsky 2010, p. 106; Carver et al. 2010, p. 882). Therefore, the way an individual explains events can determine how helpless or in control they feel (Seligman 2006, p. 16). Optimistic thinking can motivate individuals to continue to work towards solutions. Therefore, optimists tend to succeed and are unlikely to slip into helplessness, as they are aware that their efforts are a factor in life outcomes (Reivich 2010b, p. 25; Lyubomirsky 2010, p. 106; Carver et al. 2010, p. 884). Jenny over the past four-weeks has noticed that positive thinking can enable you to engage in more effective, active and problem-focused coping. For example, during an interview Jenny had stated how optimistic thinking had allowed her to respond in a more positive and rational way to a highly negative work situation, which stopped the issue from escalating further. I also experienced this benefit of optimistic thinking. For example, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May I had written in my diary that I was experiencing a significant amount of distress about a particular assignment, but

by thinking positively I was able to engage in problem focused coping by asking my tutor for some help in regards to this assignment. Both my clients and I have experienced how optimistic thinking can increase an individual's motivation. For example, during an interview with Jenny she had stated how positive thinking has allowed her to set daily goals and achievements, which help to keep her focused and motivated. Samantha has also stated that optimistic thinking had motivated her to continue to work towards solutions involving an important interview that she had earlier in the week.

Finally, it has been found that an individual's thoughts can impact their emotions and behaviours, and vice versa. This suggests that there is a cyclical process occurring between thoughts, behaviours and emotions (Saleem 2014, p. 86). As a result optimistic thinking can promote a positive mood, vitality and high morale (Lyubomirsky 2010, p. 107). Seligman (2006, p. 7) states that an individual's thoughts are not reactions to events but they can change what occurs such as if an individual believes they are helpless in making a difference in their child's life they will become paralyzed when dealing with their children. Both my clients and I have experienced some of the above benefits of optimism. For example, I had written in a diary entry about how I was thinking quite negatively about my weight, which had negatively affected not only my mood but also my behaviour but by arguing with myself about these thoughts, which is a technique described by Seligman (2006, pp. 218-219) I was able to realize these were distortions I had created about myself and not actual facts. This allowed me to feel a bit more positive, which in turn helped create a more positive mood and changed my behaviour.

It is clear that academic research is reflected in both my clients and my own experiences. According, to academic research optimism does increase one's happiness

and this is reflected in my clients as well as my own final happiness score, which have significantly increased since the beginning of the activity. These scores are presented in the table 1 and 2 below.

Table 1  
*Beginning and Final Happiness Scores on the OHQ*

	Beginning OHQ score (1 d.p.)	Final OHQ score (1 d.p.)	Increased or Decreased (1 d.p.)
Lauren	4.3	5.3	+ 0.8
Jenny	4.3	5	+0.3
Samanatha	2.2	4.9	+1.4

Table 2  
*Beginning and Final Scores on the SHS*

	Beginning SHS score (1 d.p.)	Final SHS score (1 d.p.)	Increased or Decreased (1 d.p.)
Lauren	4.5	4.8	+0.5
Jenny	4.8	5	+0.5
Samanatha	3.5	4.8	+2.6

### **Benefits and Disadvantages of the Activity**

After consulting with my clients it is clear that there are some benefits and disadvantages of positive thinking. According, to my clients there are numerous benefits to positive thinking such as feeling more in control of situations or emotions, and being able to reflect on themselves. Another benefit of positive thinking was increased motivation and focus. Positive thinking also allowed my clients to be more self aware, process or sort through emotions and thoughts. Positive thinking also allowed my clients—Jenny more so than Samanatha—to revisit negative situations and allow reflection on those experiences in order to learn lessons that can be applied in future situations. Positive thinking also helped my clients as well as myself to reduce stress as well as to stop rumination.

Both Jenny and Samanatha stated that there was one main disadvantage to this activity, which was that it was quite time consuming to write in a journal everyday especially when both my clients were quite busy with work or school. Jenny stated

that another disadvantage of this activity was filling out the two questionnaires; as two questionnaires was a bit time consuming to fill out. Jenny also stated that revisiting painful situations was also a disadvantage of positive thinking, however it allowed her to reflect and make improvements for the future.

### **Recommendations**

With a significant amount of academic research in the field of optimism and after observing how optimistic thinking can increase an individual's happiness through the use of my client's as well as my own experiences, it is clear that this activity should be recommended to others as a method to try if they are looking to increase their happiness. It is recommended that those who continue with or start this activity be allowed to choose how often they write in their journals, as writing everyday it is quite time consuming and benefits some more than others. It is also recommended that if questionnaires are to be used as an evaluation method that the two questionnaires used in this report be combined into one questionnaire. I would also recommend that client's use a method of positive thinking that suits them best such as thinking about what lessons can be learnt from negative situations that can be applied to the future.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix A1*

#### CST228 Happiness: Investigating its Causes and Conditions Happiness Consultancy Report Information Sheet

Your participation is being sought to investigate the effects of cultivating optimism for a happiness consultancy report undertaken by Lauren Maher, a student of University of Wollongong under the supervision of Professor Brian Martin and Associate Chris Barker.

This project will involve you undertaking cultivating optimism, in the form of thinking optimistically for four weeks (starting 24/ 4/15 and ending 22/5/15). During these weeks you will need to write in a diary (either a book or a word document) everyday. In these entries you should write about any negative thoughts you may have and how you turn these thoughts in positive thoughts, which can be done through various ways such as:

- Focusing on the positive of the situation
- Thinking about the opportunities this situation provides
- What you learnt from the situation
- Identifying barrier or negative thoughts
- Changing the direction of your thoughts

In these entries you will also need to write about how these positive and negatives make you feel. At the end of the 5 weeks you will turn your diaries in. These diaries will be yours to keep and will not be seen by anyone else other than you.

At the beginning of the four weeks you will be asked to complete a subjective happiness scale, which will be used to create a baseline to see whether this activity affects your happiness. The same happiness scale will be administered again after the four-week period has finished to see the effects of this activity on your happiness.

At least once a week at the end of each week during this period we will have a semi-structured interview through a method that is convenient for you i.e. Facebook conversation so I can monitor your progress with this activity. These interviews will involve questions like: “ How are you finding this activity?” “Do you think your happiness is improving and why?” and “ Can you talk about a situation during the week where you turned a negative into a positive?” These interviews may be tape-recorded but will not be done without your consent. These interviews will be recorded in the form of a diary if you wish to have your name excluded or any other type of information excluded just let me know. They will also be destroyed at the end of the report is completed.



UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

## **Information Sheet**

*for participants in the research project*

# **Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions**

being conducted by Lauren Maher of the Media and Cultural Studies Program

Your participation is sought in a research project being undertaken by students of the University of Wollongong under the supervision of Professor Brian Martin and Associate Professor Chris Barker.

The project involves carrying out an assessment of the causes and conditions of happiness among individuals and making recommendations as to how happiness could be increased. Students will write up a report of the project's methods and findings that will be made available to you.

The project will involve carrying out semi-structured interviews, or conversations, with consenting adult participants lasting approximately 30 minutes. You will be asked questions such as "What do you most enjoy?" and "What would make you happier?"

The conversations may be tape-recorded with your consent but no one other than the student researchers Lauren Maher and Professor Brian Martin and Associate Professor Chris Barker will hear them notwithstanding the legal right of a court to subpoena transcripts in relation to criminal offences. It is not the intention to publish any of the material. However, should we later wish to do so, your further agreement will be sought. The tapes will be destroyed after transcription.

Your participation in this research is voluntary; you are free to decline to participate and you are free to withdraw from the research at any time. Your refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect your relationship with the University of Wollongong in any way. If you would like to discuss this research further please contact A/Prof Chris Barker on (02) 4221 3671 or Prof Brian Martin on (02) 4221 3763. If you have any enquiries regarding the ethical conduct of the research please contact the Secretary of the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee on (02) 4221 4457.

*Appendix B*

Consent Forms have been removed to respect clients' privacy



Interview Questions

**First Interview:**

1. How do you feel your happiness was before starting this activity? Why?
2. How do you feel about your happiness score? Was it what you expected? Why?
3. How are you finding this activity? Why?
4. Can you describe for me a negative thought you have had this week? How did you handle it? How did thinking negatively affect you? How did thinking positively affect you?
5. How are you feeling about the activity? Why?
6. Do you think this activity is improving your happiness? Why?
7. What effects is this task having on your happiness?
8. How are you going with the activity?
9. Name; age; occupation

**Second Interview:**

1. How are you finding this activity? Why?
2. Can you describe for me a negative thought you have had this week? How did you handle it? How did thinking negatively affect you? How did thinking positively affect you?
3. How are you feeling about the activity? Why?
4. Do you think this activity is improving your happiness? Why?
5. What effects is this task having on your happiness?
6. How are you going with the activity?

**Third Interview:**

1. How do you feel your happiness was before starting this activity? Why?
2. How do you feel about your happiness score? Was it what you expected? Why?
3. How are you finding this activity? Why?
4. Can you describe for me a negative thought you have had this week? How did you handle it? How did thinking negatively affect you? How did thinking positively affect you?
5. How are you feeling about the activity? Why?
6. Do you think this activity is improving your happiness? Why?

7. What effects is this task having on your happiness?
8. How are you going with the activity?

**Final Interview:**

1. How do you feel your happiness is after doing this task? Why?
2. How did you find the activity? Why?
3. Do you feel the activity improved your happiness? Why?
4. How do you feel about your happiness score? Was it what you expected?  
Why?
5. What did you enjoy the most about the activity you undertook?
6. What did you enjoy the least about the activity you undertook?
7. Have you changed your thinking or behaviour as a result of the activity?
8. Over time, has it become easier or more difficult to carry out the activity?
9. What factors helped you to continue the activity?
10. What factors made it difficult for you to continue the activity?
11. If you repeated the activity what would you do to increase the likelihood of continuing with it?
12. Would you recommend the activity to others?
13. If so, would you try to encourage them to undertake it? If so, how?

# Oxford Happiness Questionnaire

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The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire was developed by psychologists Michael Argyle and Peter Hills at Oxford University.

## Instructions

Below are a number of statements about happiness. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each by entering a number in the blank after each statement, according to the following scale:

- 1 = strongly disagree
- 2 = moderately disagree
- 3 = slightly disagree
- 4 = slightly agree
- 5 = moderately agree
- 6 = strongly agree

Please read the statements carefully, some of the questions are phrased positively and others negatively. Don't take too long over individual questions; there are no "right" or "wrong" answers (and no trick questions). The first answer that comes into your head is probably the right one for you. If you find some of the questions difficult, please give the answer that is true for you in general or for most of the time.

## The Questionnaire

1. I don't feel particularly pleased with the way I am. ( R) \_\_\_\_\_
2. I am intensely interested in other people. \_\_\_\_\_
3. I feel that life is very rewarding. \_\_\_\_\_
4. I have very warm feelings towards almost everyone. \_\_\_\_\_
5. I rarely wake up feeling rested. (R) \_\_\_\_\_
6. I am not particularly optimistic about the future. (R) \_\_\_\_\_
7. I find most things amusing. \_\_\_\_\_
8. I am always committed and involved. \_\_\_\_\_
9. Life is good. \_\_\_\_\_
10. I do not think that the world is a good place. (R) \_\_\_\_\_
11. I laugh a lot. \_\_\_\_\_
12. I am well satisfied about everything in my life. \_\_\_\_\_
13. I don't think I look attractive. (R) \_\_\_\_\_
14. There is a gap between what I would like to do and what I have done. (R) \_\_\_\_\_
15. I am very happy. \_\_\_\_\_

16. I find beauty in some things. \_\_\_\_\_
17. I always have a cheerful effect on others. \_\_\_\_\_
18. I can fit in (find time for) everything I want to. \_\_\_\_\_
19. I feel that I am not especially in control of my life. (R) \_\_\_\_\_
20. I feel able to take anything on. \_\_\_\_\_
21. I feel fully mentally alert. \_\_\_\_\_
22. I often experience joy and elation. \_\_\_\_\_
23. I don't find it easy to make decisions. (R) \_\_\_\_\_
24. I don't have a particular sense of meaning and purpose in my life. (R) \_\_\_\_\_
25. I feel I have a great deal of energy. \_\_\_\_\_
26. I usually have a good influence on events. \_\_\_\_\_
27. I don't have fun with other people. (R) \_\_\_\_\_
28. I don't feel particularly healthy. (R) \_\_\_\_\_
29. I don't have particularly happy memories of the past. (R) \_\_\_\_\_

**Calculate your score**

**Step 1.** Items marked (R) should be scored in reverse:

For example, if you gave yourself a "1," cross it out and change it to a "6."

Change "2" to a "5"

Change "3" to a "4"

Change "4" to a "3"

Change "5" to a "2"

Change "6" to a "1"

**Step 2.** Add the numbers for all 29 questions. (Use the converted numbers for the 12 items that are reverse scored.)

**Step 3.** Divide by 29. So your happiness score = the total (from step 2) divided by 29.

Your Happiness Score: \_\_\_\_\_

Reference:

<http://www.meaningandhappiness.com/oxford-happiness-questionnaire/214/>

## Subjective Happiness Scale

*For each of the following statements and/or questions, please circle the point on the scale that you feel is most appropriate in describing you.*

1. In general, I consider myself:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not a very happy person						a very happy person

2. Compared with most of my peers, I consider myself:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
less happy						more happy

3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all						a great deal

4. Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all						a great deal