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Balancing Your Positivity Ratio



Balancing your positivity ratio

What is the point of positivity?

Positivity is often over-sold and under-delivered. We have all had an experience of being told to “look at the positives” or “just don’t dwell on the negative” in a way that has left us feeling worse, and may have even been counterproductive to our positivity. Building positivity isn’t a quick fix to everything that goes wrong, and it definitely doesn’t stop negative experiences from happening. Instead it’s a long-term approach to balancing out the negatives we experience by giving the positive that do exist more attention, time and energy. Building your positivity is not difficult or time-consuming, but does require changing some well-worn habits and building new routines.

Turning on your positivity switch:

To get a sense of what positivity is, pause for a moment and turn on your positivity switch in order to recognise what positives may exist around you, but are overlooked or hidden under other negatives. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is right about my current circumstances?
- What makes me lucky to be here?
- What aspect of my current circumstances might I view as a gift to be treasured? How does it benefit me or others?

Take a moment to answer these questions:

What is positivity?

Positive emotions, like all emotions, arise from how we interpret events as they unfold.

Positivity (1) includes the ability to experience a number of positive emotions; the ten most commonly experienced are listed below.

Take a moment to think about what evokes each emotion for you and how you can build your experience of that emotion.

Emotion	Possible examples:	Activity, memory, person or memento that evokes this for you
Joy Unexpected rush of happiness or delight	Birth of a child, unexpected bonus, winning a prize	
Gratitude Opens your heart and urges you to give back	When someone goes out of their way to help, a mentor steers you in your career, being grateful for health	
Serenity Let's sit back and soak it in	Reading a book with a cat on your lap, walking along the beach	
Interest Sense of possibility and mystery	Learning a skill, reading for interest, studying	
Hope Belief things can change	Hearing stories of success and triumph	
Pride A good feeling when you can take credit for achievements of any size	Finishing a home project, winning a race, publishing a paper	
Amusement When something unexpected makes you laugh	Cat videos, comedy shows, humorous greeting cards	
Inspiration Being uplifted to express what's good and do it yourself - it pulls us out of our shell	Witnessing a role model succeed, reading something that connects with your motivations	
Awe When you come across goodness on a grand scale and feel overwhelmed by greatness and momentarily transfixed	Seeing something magnificent in nature, or a human achievement. Seeing a wonder of the world, Neil Armstrong taking first steps on the moon	
Love All of the above intermingled	Seeing someone we care for deeply, physical affection	

Negativity bias

Have you ever noticed how much more impact negativity has on us? How the emotions of anger, fear, and disgust can stick with us or form memories we won't forget in a hurry? This is because humans have evolved to recognise these emotions more quickly, as they were often associated with life-harming events (2). Those that anticipated danger quickly and remembered the risk next time were more likely to survive, hence developed a tendency for humans to overestimate threats and underestimate opportunities and resources.

Although humans no longer face the same degree of life-or-death decisions each day, we have retained the same responses to these negative emotions. Negative stimuli continue to produce more neural activity in the brain than positive stimuli, leading negative events to be stored quickly in the brain, while positive emotions need to be held in awareness for a dozen or more seconds to transfer from short-term memory to long-term storage. Another way to think of this is the brain being Velcro for negative experiences but Teflon for positive ones.

Broaden and build your positive emotions

Knowing that we have a biological negativity bias, we can start taking simple steps to allow the positives to build the same impact on our brain, experience and memory.

The first step involves increasing the amount of time you notice and attend to the positive emotions you experience. By doing so, you open yourself to noticing more positive emotions and opportunities to experience them.

Negative emotions close out new experiences and reduce our positive emotions. Most people have experienced a downwards spiral of negativity, where the negative thoughts, emotions and experiences feed on themselves to make us feel worse.

The *broaden and build* (1) approach uses the same dynamic but in reverse. Much like the sun opens a lotus flower and emerging darkness closes it, positive emotions open us up to more options, open our visual field, and enhance creativity, making us better at seeing the positives and integrating that information. Managers with greater positivity are more accurate and careful in decision making and more effective interpersonally. Negotiators who come in with a cooperative and friendly spirit stick a better deal.

How do I score on positivity?

As we have established, all experiences and emotions are not created equal in the impact they have on us, so it makes sense that just balancing positive to negative emotions may not be enough for us to receive the benefit from positivity. Barbara Fredrickson's research (1) in this area proposes that a 3:1 ratio of experiencing positive emotions to negative emotions starts to tip the scale in terms of benefit, and starts to build a positive upwards spiral.

Interestingly her research indicated that most people (80% of an American sample) fall below this ratio, with most people sitting around the 2:1 mark.

As the questionnaire gets you to reflect on the last 24 hours it can be significantly influenced by a bad day, so it is possible to score 1:1 or lower in the course of our daily lives. However, if you consistently score 1:1 or lower you may warrant more individualised support to increase your ratio.

Now, with this information in mind, take time to complete the positive ratio questionnaire in the appendix or online at <http://www.positivityresonance.com/index.html>

The maths of it – what does the ratio mean for me?

As previously stated, this approach does not seek to eliminate negatives from our lives, as eliminating all negatives isn't actually helpful, and it's virtually impossible; despite your best efforts, they will continue to exist. Instead, we want to balance out the negatives with enough positives to trigger an upward spiral, which means seeking a 3:1 ratio of positives to negatives. So how do we do this?

Reducing any negatives has the greatest overall impact on tipping the ratio in your favour. So this is where we start in this workbook.

Then we look at strategies to build your positive emotions in ways that allow you to get the maximum benefit from the activities and experiences you already have, along with consciously building in activities that let your positivity grow.

If you can minimise the impact of a few negatives while also building on the positives, you can achieve the desired balance more readily.

Decreasing negativity

This approach doesn't eliminate negativity – it focuses on reducing negatives if you can, and increasing positivity to improve your overall ratio.

It is important to remember that appropriate negativity, such as grief, anger and fear, is important to keep us grounded. We don't want to eliminate negativity, but reducing unhelpful and unhealthy negativity can provide big gains in developing the 3:1 positivity ratio.

Dispute negative thinking

We can develop habits in how we think that we are not aware of. Identifying and challenging these automatic negative thoughts can assist us to shed some unhelpful negativity.

Activities:

Thought challenging: This involves taking your initial automatic thoughts and reflecting on them to see what inbuilt biases might be adding to your negativity. One model is the ABCD method

Activating event – What happened? What is stressing me out?

Belief – What is my negative self-talk? What interpretations am I making? What negative assumptions am I clinging to?

Consequence – What am I feeling as a result of these beliefs? How might that affect my behaviour?

Dispute – Is there important information I'm overlooking? Is there an alternative, more realistic way of looking at this? What would I say to a friend if they were in the same situation?

Talking to that friend/colleague/mentor can also help you to see another point of view you didn't see initially.

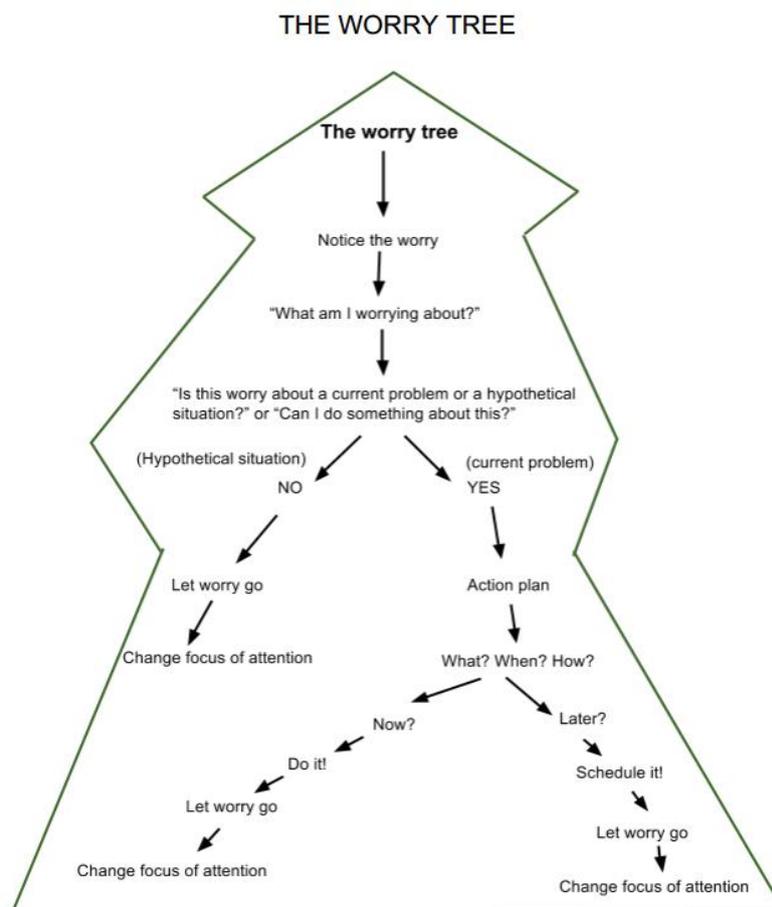
Break the grip of rumination

Rumination is when we go over and over a problem but don't actually achieve any resolution; we often only increase our intensity and duration of negativity.

Activities:

Stop activity: The first challenge is to recognise we are ruminating. We can often convince ourselves that going over an event again and again will be helpful, or sometimes it just happens automatically. But when we recognise it we need to consciously "stop" and do something different (like challenge the thinking or follow the worry tree).

Worry tree: The worry tree assists us to determine what to do with our worry. Is this something we can start to solve or is it completely out of our control and therefore not worth our time and energy? By following each step of the worry tree, we can categorise worries into those we can action and those we should let go.



Let go of rumination through mindfulness activities: When we learn to be mindful we learn to take those thoughts and concerns that can hook us and cause rumination or negative emotions, and let them wash over us non-judgementally. Example of mindfulness activities are provided in the appendix.

Become more mindful

Mindfulness is a type of meditation that involves paying attention in a particular way – on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally. You mentally step back from the stream of your thoughts and sensations, and gain a wider perspective of your thinking.

Activities:

Explore guided mindful apps or websites: There is a lot of good quality free content available online to start experimenting with mindfulness. You will notice a lot of variation in the style of delivery and what you are being “mindful about”, e.g. noticing your breathing, being mindful while eating a piece of food, or noticing the colours around you. Try a few different styles to find one that works best for you. Example of mindfulness activities are provided in the appendix.

Attend a yoga or meditation class: Attending a class is a great way to learn the basics and to build practice into your weekly routine. Most yoga classes incorporate gentle exercises with meditation practices to slow down your body and mind, and are another great place to practise this skill.

Defuse negative landmines

Consider the activities that trigger negative emotions for you. Sometimes we find ourselves continuing to walk straight into these landmines. When you have identified your own landmines and are in a neutral space – for example, if driving to work in peak hour traffic is a landmine for you – consider the following options:

Avoid the situation (if non-essential): Look to take the bus to work, removing the need for you to drive.

Modify the situation: Change the time you drive if it avoids traffic, carpool, or take audiobooks for the journey.

Attend to different aspects of the situation: Instead of focusing on the traffic or the time listen to the radio or audiobooks – notice the changes on the way to work.

Change the meaning of the situation: Instead of a stressful commute, think of it as protected “me time” when you are out of touch by phone or email.

Assess your media diet

The media focuses on negative news stories because that is what grabs the viewers’ attention. However, this can develop a skewed perception of violence. People who watch less TV are more accurate judges of the degree of risk we might encounter each day.

Find substitutes for gossip and sarcasm

These forms of amusement can be a double-edged sword: they come at a price for you and others, and can bring everyone's positivity ratio down. Consider commenting on a positive quality of someone, poke fun lightly, throw puns, not barbs.

Dealing with negative people

Sometimes our negative landmines can come in the form of negative people. Sometimes we invite negative people into our conversations. Have you ever stopped to talk to a person who you know will see a problem from your point of view and will confirm how you feel? Sometimes we like having this confirmation that our assessment was right, but then what happens when the other person keeps continuing with the negative past the point of usefulness for you? Does it actually help in the long run to have someone confirm your negativity? The strategies for defusing negative landmines also apply to defusing negative people.

Modify the social situation: Can you limit your exposure to this person? Do you find yourself feeding their negativity? Choose joint activities that inspire you. Offer positive reframes to their glass-half-empty thinking.

Attend to them differently: What are their positive qualities? What do you appreciate about them?

Change the meaning: Could this person or situation be a teacher in disguise? Reframe the situation as a challenge to be more mindful and less judgemental, or more compassionate.

Don't overthink the positives

Overthinking those moments when you do have positive emotions is one of the quickest way to kill the positive and reduce its impact. The aim is to notice and experience the positive without questioning it. Particular thoughts to avoid include:

- Thinking about when the positive experience will end.
- Thinking about whether you deserve this positive experience.
- Thinking about how much more might be expected of you now.

Instead, just notice the positive elements, name the emotion if you can and notice what it feels like. Think about how you would describe the event or emotion to a good friend who would want to share your positive. Think about what you might do with this positive – for example, add it to a gratitude journal or share it with a friend.

Increasing positivity

Increasing positivity is more than just doing more of the things we enjoy; it is taking a few moments to notice and absorb the positivity from the positive experiences we already have, but also about finding the positives in the everyday that we often overlook.

Find positive meaning

Is the glass half empty or half full? Most circumstances we face are not 100% bad or 100% permanent, but that negativity bias we discussed earlier can lead us to believe they are. Seeking a “silver-lining” to any event is often subtle but still adds to the positivity ratio. Sometimes it can be challenging to find a silver lining in adverse events at these times it may just be to acknowledge that “this too shall pass”.

Just as we asked you at the beginning of this workbook consider:

- What is right about my current circumstances?
- What makes me lucky to be here?
- What aspect of my current circumstances might I view as a gift to be treasured? How does it benefit me or others?

Activities:

Affirmations: Write down the phrases or affirmations that help you to find some more positivity. They might be phrases that make you smile, give you hope, or remind you of what we need to remember when times are tough. Put them in a place where you will see them during the day, e.g. next to your computer or on your phone alarm.

For example:

“Life may hand you a cactus but you don’t have to sit on it. Being negative only makes a difficult journey more difficult”

“This too shall pass”

“What will I care when I am 70?”

Savour goodness

In addition to finding the good in the bad, you can also find further good in the good. Enjoy the good, savour it, remember it, and share the good with others who will celebrate with you.

Activities:

Recall the positives: Remembering happy memories and past achievements elicits positivity by recreating the same neurochemistry in the brain as the original event. Put yourself back in the moment: What happened? Who was around? How did you feel at the time?

Share the positives: Get in touch with the friend/colleague who likes to share in your good news. You may initially find this uncomfortable, as many of us have been taught that “bragging” is a bad quality. But we all have a friend or family member who is happy to celebrate the positives, no matter how small. Get into the habit of sharing the positives. For example, instead of getting home and sharing all of the negatives from the day, challenge each other to share the positives before you go to sleep.

Count your blessings

Recast aspects of your daily life that before seemed hidden from view or altogether mundane as veritable gifts to be cherished.

Activities:

A gratitude journal, where you write down in a notebook at least three positives from the day and make a habit to do this every day. If you find it difficult to find three positives also consider: What went well? What am I grateful for? What went better than expected?

If you are creative you can also create a gratitude poster where you collect pictures and other reminders of things you are grateful for, or create a gratitude box of items and mementos. You can also create a positive feedback folder in your email inbox, where you can save the “Thank you”s and “well done”s.

Kindness counts

Acting kindly and noticing your acts of kindness to others can improve your positivity ratio. Research indicates a stronger effect if you perform several large acts of kindness on a single day, rather than spreading them across the week.

Activities:

Random acts of kindness: Being kind to others has multiple effects on positivity. We feel good when we give, expecting nothing in return, but we also add to someone else’s positivity. Having a kindness day, where you go a little out of your way to be kind, has a booster effect on your positivity.

Say “Thank you”: Taking the time to thank people has an effect on others, while also increasing our own positivity. It may be acknowledging them for something they usually do, or thanking them for a special effort they have made.

Follow your passions

Give yourself permission to play. There is a reason that children laugh more than adults – they are not trying to be serious, and do what feels good. Find the activities that give you flow – this is where you become fully absorbed in an activity, and the challenges faced are matched with increasing skill development. You’re fully engaged. This could be found with work or with hobbies.

Activities:

Make time for your interests and passions: If you enjoy an activity make time for it. It doesn't have to contribute to your career or purpose in life to add to your positivity. We can enjoy a sense of accomplishment and mastery when we look back at something we have completed, whether it is cooking a meal for friends, finishing a run, or knitting. If we enjoy it, it's worth it.

Discover new interests: Try new things, become curious, or do something outside of your comfort zone, e.g. laughing yoga.

Dream about your future

Conjure up the best possibilities for yourself: Visualise future success in detail. This can be useful in building motivation and clarity for long-term projects.

Visualise yourself achieving your goal: This is a strategy used by many professional athletes who visualise themselves completing the actions required to win. Creating a mental blueprint before a high-pressure event can pave the way for us to execute the tasks competently and confidently. A non-sport example of this technique is the Foggy Window Exercise (3) (a link for the audio version is available in the appendix):

Sit in a quiet room and close your eyes. Think of your goal or what it is you wish to accomplish. It does not matter that the details of the vision are not fully formed. It is important that such a goal or vision is one that does not involve harm to another or bad intent. While this technique could help you accomplish such a goal, it will ultimately result in pain and suffering to yourself and make you unhappy.

Relax your body completely. Once relaxed, focus on your breathing and try to empty your mind completely of all thoughts. When thoughts arise, guide your attention back to your breath.

Continue to breathe in and out, completely emptying your mind.

Now think of your goal or wish and see yourself as having accomplished it. Sit with the vision as you slowly breathe in and out.

Feel the positive emotions associated with accomplishing your goal or having achieved your wish. Experience how good it feels to have taken a thought and turned it into reality. Sit with the positive feelings as you see yourself having accomplished your goal.

Once you have seen yourself having accomplished the goal and sat with the positive feelings, now begin to add details to the vision. Exactly how do you look? Where are you? How are people responding to you? Add as much detail to the vision as possible.

Repeat one to two times daily or more for 10-30 minutes. Each time begin with the vision of yourself having accomplished your goal. Sit with the feelings. Each time as you look at the vision add more details. It will start fuzzy but the more times you do the exercise the more the vision will become clearer and clearer.

With each time you do the exercise you will find you are editing the vision as your unconscious mind begins having clarity of the intent

www.intothemagicshop.com/exercises

Apply your strengths

People who have the opportunity every day to do what they do best, by acting on their strengths, are far more likely to flourish. One way to learn more about your own strengths is by participating in the online *VIA Character Strengths* questionnaire. Sometimes we have opportunities to work to our strengths through our work, but sometimes it is other settings, such as being a family member or volunteering, that lets us engage in our strengths.

Activities:

Discover your character strengths: Fill out the online VIA Character Strengths questionnaire to get a personalised report and suggestions to build on your strengths (<http://www.viacharacter.org>)

Seek coaching or mentoring: If you have difficulty recognising or acknowledging your strengths, seeking feedback from others and engaging in mentoring or coaching can help, by having another person guide you through this process.

Connect with others

Social relationships containing warmth and trust are considered a necessary condition for flourishing, we were designed to be social creatures. So connect with others, every day, no matter what. Even if you are not a naturally outgoing person, act like you are until you start to feel more comfortable, or find social situations that let you be included. It's important to remember it's not the number of social relationships that make the biggest impact is the relationships where we feel included. Connecting with others who have similar interests is a good way to foster positive social relationships.

Activities:

Schedule in regular catch-ups: It's easy to intend to catch up with people but not get around to it. So make it a priority to schedule times to catch up with the people that count.

Reconnect: If you have lost contact with someone, then make the effort to reconnect. There are a lot of reasons why friendships can drop off. Don't let that negativity bias convince you it's not worth it. Reconnect by any means that feel comfortable for you, whether it be text, email or Facebook – anywhere is a good place to start.

Connect with like-minded people: Connecting with others who have similar interests is a good way to foster positive social relationships.

Connect with nature

Natural environments may be just as important as social relationships. People who spent 20 minutes or more outside when the weather was nice showed positive effects on mood. Nice weather has no effect if you don't go outside to enjoy it.

Activities:

Go outside on your breaks, and seek out green spaces: Even small breaks away from our desks are good for us, but when we connect this with movement and the outdoors, the benefits increase. If you can find green spaces on your sojourns outside you will get a further booster to your positivity.

Try a walking meeting: Who says meetings need to be in stuffy offices? Walking meetings work best for meetings of 2-3 people, when you walk at a casual pace – so you can still talk. Experiment with a walking meeting, to compare how you feel after compared to a standard meeting.

Exercise outside: Exercising has numerous benefits on our positivity through the release of feel-good neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin, but exercising outside, even on an overcast day, has shown to have even greater effects on our positivity.

Open your mind

By practising mindfulness and other forms of meditation, we can learn to broaden and open our mind to further positivity. People who participated in a mindfulness training session showed immediate and sustained brain activity (at four months) related to known positivity areas in the brain. Being mindful involves accepting goodness however it arrives, by practising acceptance and not analysis.

Activities:

Explore guided mindful apps or websites: Visit www.positivityratio.com for guided meditation related to opening your mind, or experiment with other mindfulness and meditation practices.

Open you heart

This involves a particular type of meditation that aims to evoke positive emotions, especially in the context of your relationships. It involves evoking warm, tender and compassionate feelings you receive from others, and then moves to directing these feelings to ever-widening circles of others.

Activities:

Open your heart meditation: Try this specific type of meditation using the script below (3) or following the links provided:

Relax your body completely

Once relaxed, focus on your breathing and try to empty your mind completely of all thoughts. When thoughts arise, guide your attention back to your breath.

Continue to breathe in and out, completely emptying your mind.

Now think of the person in your life who has given you unconditional love, or conversely, who in your life have you given unconditional love.

Sit with that feeling of warmth and contentment that unconditional love brings, while you slowly breathe in and out. Feel the power of unconditional love and how you feel accepted and cared for even with all your flaws and imperfections.

Think of someone you care for and with intent, extend unconditional love to them. Understand that the gift you are giving her is the same gift that someone gave to you and will make others feel cared for and protected.

As you are giving that same unconditional love to one you care for, think again how you feel when you have been given unconditional love and acceptance.

Again reflect on how it feels to be cared for, protected, and loved regardless of your flaws and imperfections and think of a person to whom you know but have neutral feelings. Now with intention extend the same unconditional love to them. As you are embracing them with love, wish them a prosperous life with limited suffering. Hold them in your mind and see their future. See their happiness. Let yourself be bathed in that warm feeling.

Now think of someone with whom you have had a difficult relationship or have negative feelings. Understand that oftentimes one's actions are a manifestation of one's pain. See them as yourself, a flawed, imperfect being who at times struggles and makes mistakes. Think of the person in your own life who gave you unconditional love. Reflect on how that love and acceptance impacted you. With intention give that same feeling of unconditional love to that person who is difficult or for whom you have negative feelings.

See everyone you meet as a flawed imperfect being just like you who have made mistakes, taken wrong turns, and at times have hurt others. Yet, who are struggling and deserve love. With intention give them unconditional love. In your mind bathe them with love, warmth and acceptance. It does not matter their response.

www.intothemagicshop.com/exercises
www.positivityratio.com

Develop positivity portfolios

Consider developing a larger portfolio for each of the common positive emotions. This may feel a bit childish, but when it comes to positivity it's important to reflect that children know what we have forgotten as adults. Each portfolio might contain photos, letters, quotes or objects that carry deep personal meaning for you. Store these mementoes in a box or folder.

Activities:

Create a positivity space at your desk: If possible bring a few photos and mementoes that elicit positive emotions and keep them near your desk so you can notice them often.

Create a virtual portfolio: Use technology to develop an online portfolio of pictures, events or memories that create positive emotions for you. Apps like Pinterest act as a virtual scrap book, or 1 Second Everyday lets you collect one-second videos each day to develop another type of portfolio. You can share these online or keep them private.

References for further reading

1. Fredrickson, B (2009). *Positivity: ground-breaking research reveals how to embrace the hidden strength of positive emotions, overcome negativity, and thrive*
2. Hanson, R. (2013). *Hardwiring happiness: the new brain science of contentment, calm and confidence*
3. Doty, J. (2016). *Into the magic shop: a neurosurgeon's true story of the life changing magic of compassion mindfulness*

Mindfulness links with guided examples

<http://intothemagicshop.com/exercises>

www.positivityratio.com

<https://www.headspace.com/>

<https://smilingmind.com.au/>

Other resources

[Celebrate what's right with the world](#) Dewitt Jones, National Geographic

My positivity ratio

Instructions

How have you felt in the past day? Look back over the past day (i.e. from this time yesterday up to right now). Using the 0-4 scale below, indicate the greatest degree to which you've experienced each of the following feelings.

- 0 = Not at all
- 1 = A little bit
- 2 = Moderately
- 3 = Quite a bit
- 4 = Extremely

	A	B
What is the most amused, fun-loving, or silly you felt?	<input type="text"/>	
What is the most angry, irritated, or annoyed you felt?		<input type="text"/>
What is the most ashamed, humiliated, or disgraced you felt?		<input type="text"/>
What is the most awe, wonder, or amazement you felt?	<input type="text"/>	
What is the most contemptuous, scornful, or disdainful you felt?		<input type="text"/>
What is the most disgust, distaste, or revulsion you felt?		<input type="text"/>
What is the most embarrassed, self-conscious, or blushing you felt?		<input type="text"/>
What is the most grateful, appreciative, or thankful you felt?	<input type="text"/>	
What is the most guilty, repentant, or blameworthy you felt?		<input type="text"/>
What is the most hate, distrust, or suspicion you felt?		<input type="text"/>
What is the most hopeful, optimistic, or encouraged you felt?	<input type="text"/>	
What is the most inspired, uplifted, or elevated you felt?	<input type="text"/>	
What is the most interested, alert, or curious you felt?	<input type="text"/>	
What is the most joyful, glad, or happy you felt?	<input type="text"/>	
What is the most love, closeness, or trust you felt?	<input type="text"/>	
What is the most proud, confident, or self-assured you felt?	<input type="text"/>	
What is the most sad, downhearted, or unhappy you felt?		<input type="text"/>
What is the most scared, fearful, or afraid you felt?		<input type="text"/>
What is the most serene, content, or peaceful you felt?	<input type="text"/>	
What is the most stressed, nervous, or overwhelmed you felt?		<input type="text"/>

Now cross out all of the 1s you recorded in column A

Add remaining scores in each column **Total** :

Divide the total for column A by column B : **1**

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