



# Happiness and Depression

## A Do Something Different Research Report



# Executive Summary

The findings of this research show that using your existing strengths to behave in different ways is much better for wellbeing than continuing to use your strengths the same way you always have.

Trying new ways of behaving on a daily basis has an immediate and lasting impact on levels of happiness and depression.

The key to this transformation is changing old habits by being flexible in behaviour. The Do Something Different behaviour change programme increases Behavioural Flexibility by getting people to engage in activities and behave in ways they have not experienced before.

## Background

This report is based on research by Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson (2005)<sup>1</sup>. Much research has been completed in the area of positive psychology, with the general aim of highlighting how we can enhance positive emotions, positive character and how certain institutions help facilitate these qualities.

So much of psychological research is focused on disorders and suffering but less energy is devoted to enhancing strengths and wellbeing that already exists. Research at the University of Hertfordshire has found that increasing a person's Behavioural Flexibility can improve wellbeing in a number of areas, and the following evidence from positive psychology supports this assertion.

## The research

Several psychological interventions aiming to increase individual happiness were tested. In particular we focused on two of the happiness interventions that were similar in that they both sought to identify five signature strengths of the individual using an online survey. Participants were then instructed to identify and use their strengths more often during the week ahead (Old ways) or to use one of these strengths in a new and different way every day for a week (New ways). The only difference was that in one intervention people were using their strengths in the same way as before and in the other they were using their strengths to try out new ways of behaving.

## Participants

The study was conducted using a sample of 577 adults, with 42% males and 58% females who self-selected through a website link. A total of 411 (71%) completed all follow-up measures (up to six months later).

## Procedure

Participants completed measures of happiness and depression prior to starting the week-long intervention. They were then randomly allocated to one of five interventions or a control group. For the purpose of this report we focus on two interventions and the control. The following are brief summaries of each intervention:

*Using signature strengths in a new way:* Participants were asked to take an inventory of character strengths online at [www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org) and to receive individualised feedback about their top five ‘signature’ strengths<sup>2</sup>. They were then asked to use one of these top strengths in a new and different way every day for one week.

*Identifying signature strengths:* This exercise was a truncated version of the one just described, without the instruction to use signature strengths in new ways. Participants were asked to take the survey, to note their five highest strengths, and to use them more often during the next week.

*Placebo control exercise:* Participants were asked to write about their early memories every night for one week.

## Outcomes

Happiness and depression were measured at baseline, post-intervention, one week post-intervention, one month post-intervention, three months post-intervention and six months post-intervention to see whether any effects of the interventions were sustainable over time.

**Table 1: Mean happiness and depression levels in each intervention group by time point compared to controls.**

Measure	Intervention	Pre-test	Post-test	1 week	1 month	3 months	6 months
Happiness	New ways	56.5	57.5	58	60.5*	59.7*	60.5*
	Old ways	59	61	58.7	58.7	59.2	58.8
	Control	58.5	61.3*	58.3	58	58.8	58.8
Depression	New ways	14.8	10.8*	11*	10.1*	9.8*	10.6*
	Old ways	13.7	11.7*	12.9	12.7	13.4	13.6
	Control	14	12.2	13	12.5	13.1	13.3

*\*Denotes a statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) difference between the intervention group at that point in time and baseline scores.*

Happiness levels in the ‘New ways’ group showed significant increases from baseline at one, three and six months with the largest increase being at one and six months (11%). No such benefits were gained in the ‘Old ways’ group.

Depression levels in the 'New ways' group showed significant improvements from baseline at every time point with the largest improvement seen at 3 months (34%). In the 'Old ways' group the only improvement was seen at posttest (15%) and this did not last till the next week.

## Conclusion

This research shows the fundamental difference between doing what you've always done and doing something different. One group identified their strengths and tried to use them more for a week, with the result being no change in happiness and depression levels. The other group identified their strengths but tried using one strength per day for a week in a different way than they had previously. This resulted in improved levels of happiness and depression both immediately and over a sustained period of time.

Behaviour change is only effective if behaviour actually changes and this change is sustainable in some way. Changing the way people behave by increasing their behavioural flexibility can have a lasting impact on wellbeing.

## References

1. Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N. & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410-421.
2. Peterson, C., Park, N., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2005). Assessment of character strengths. In G. P. Koocher, J. C. Norcross, & S. S. Hill III (Eds.), *Psychologists' desk reference* (2nd ed., pp. 93–98). New York: Oxford University Press.

# Thank you.



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