

# Happiness Skills

Based on Positive Psychology



Michaela Avlund

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Michaela Avlund MSc is a Positive Psychologist. She has given classes and workshops in various parts of Ireland over the past 10 years. She specialises in working with groups or individuals around Happiness Skills and is currently working with Transition Year students. She is a regular speaker at the bi-annual Mind, Body, Spirit and Yoga Festival in the RDS in Dublin. She lives in a community in Wicklow dedicated to supporting people in the pursuit of physical, mental and spiritual well-being. She has written and co-produced two Self-confidence and Relationship DVDs which have been used in Secondary schools all over Ireland. The Independent printed her '15 tips to Happiness' interview in March 2015. She loves walking and cycling on country roads around counties Wicklow and Kildare but also leads groups in various parts of Ireland for Positive Psychology, Creative Writing and Sound Therapy Getaways.

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# Happiness Skills

**based on Positive Psychology**

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Michaela Avlund

To everyone who wishes to grow  
or support others  
in lasting well-being and happiness.



This book is dedicated  
to  
Annie and Bent Avlund

My mum Annie who in spite of childhood traumas did everything in her power to keep her six children healthy physically and spiritually. She searched for the positive truth and had nothing but encouragement for me and my siblings in spite of her own mental torments.

My dad Bent introduced me to psychology and the importance of love. He saved me at a confusing time in my youth by sharing his mantra 'Everything works for good for those who love Goodness', something I have personally experienced throughout my life to be true.

## **Acknowledgements**

This book has been inspired by the many participants in my workshops and classes over the past years, individuals who have welcomed my material and these skills as super encouraging and relevant to everyday living.

I truly stand on the shoulders of giants. So I wish to thank the many positive psychologists who through their research are supporting all my personal discoveries of how to be happy and stay well in this often confusing and difficult world.

Martin Seligman for his leadership in this area, Barbara Fredrickson for her research on our need for positive emotions. Dr Robert Emmons for his dedication to exploring the benefit of gratitude in all walks of life. Dr Richard Davidson for his amazing break-through research on our ability to create a positive brain environment which can change our lives to optimism and 'can-do' living.

I wish to thank Dr James Pennebaker for sharing the post-traumatic writing process that enables people to heal from hurtful experiences. Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson for their work on character strengths which encourages us to focus on the strengths that energise us and pursue a life that we love.



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I wish to thank Dr Illona Boniwell for setting up the master degree in applied positive psychology which I completed in London. For the encouragement of the lecturers there Kate Heffernan and co-students who shared my enthusiasm for bringing Happiness skills into mainstream teaching in Ireland.

I wish to thank the Danish trust that sponsored my studies, the Wicklow VEC and the Irish mature student scheme that enabled me to take a social care degree in Carlow. The lecturers in St. Patrick's Carlow college who acknowledged my skills and helped me to build on these.

I wish to thank the generous individuals who shared their stories with me of how they used particular happiness skills that were crucial to their positive developments and well-being. I wish to thank Ken Kelly for his amazing illustrations.

I wish to thank the community I live in for the continual support and encouragement, not only to stay healthy but for giving me the time out to write this book. For the help in

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On a personal level I wish to thank Harry Parkinson for his continual availability to discuss and edit the contents, and for his healing sound therapy. Torhild Oien for her professional advice and encouragement. Vera Walsh for her positive participation and encouragement. Bernard Kirby and Maura Power for their time and comments. Seamus Byrne for his professional publishing advice, Veronica O'Reilly for her marketing advice, Gabrielle Kirby for her inspiration and Paul Diamond for helping everything to run smoothly.

I wish to thank the many fellow catholics who have shown their delight at the title of this book and wished me good luck.

A special thank you to my friend Donal and family for the use of a quiet haven away from all distractions where I could give my total attention to the book. To Donal, my 'fitness' companion in walking and cycling on country roads around beautiful Ireland, helping me stay connected to nature. Gratitude also to my sister Eva, my brothers, and my nieces and nephew who all encouraged and supported me.

Finally, the biggest gratitude of all to God the Creator and protector of beauty and goodness who lives inside each one of us and to whom I owe everything.

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## INTRODUCTION

### WHY HAPPINESS SKILLS?

It can be quite a journey to get to the place within ourselves where we believe it is possible to personally contribute something worthwhile in the lives of others and in society whilst also increasing our own happiness and well-being.

My own journey started when I was 15 years old and my mum had a mental breakdown. Whilst searching for ways to cope and find meaning with it all I became quite spiritually aware and eventually joined an unusual monastic community which was dedicated to seeing God's goodness in everything. However, I still felt there was something missing regarding the processing of negative feelings and thoughts that can be experienced by living in close proximity to others.

Psychology was helpful as it enabled me to identify and welcome anger as an important personal message pointing out to me what I felt deep down was truly important in life.

Anger can be a negative power but to me the discovery of my own anger was an enabling experience. Someone else might spark off our anger but when we treasure that moment rather than try to get away from it we can tap in to a greater

knowledge of who we are and what we care deeply about.

I am angry but also sad when I hear of someone who takes their own life, especially a young person, because I see it as unnecessary. I am frustrated because I know that happiness and well-being is something everyone can create through a number of positive habits. I do not blame the individual or people around the person who took their own life, they more than likely did the best they knew how to support and love the person. However, I do blame our educational system for not including lifeskills training on an equal level to academic knowledge.

The research is clear: as individuals we cannot function properly, we cannot absorb new knowledge when we are stressed, emotionally upset, feeling down, bullied or disinterested in life. It is well overdue that we implement living skills teaching, that we give young people opportunities for developing well-being and happiness skills in an otherwise confusing and disempowering world that will drain our energy and crush our dreams without these skills.

This book presents a range of positive living skills that have worked for me and my students, the people I live with but more importantly for people in every corner of the world<sup>1</sup>.

My mother, I believe would not have had to struggle with depression and anxiety for the rest of her days had she been taught and given an opportunity to practise these well-being skills earlier on in life. Being overly medicated she experienced the sideeffects that accompany medications. This is not a condemnation of drugs but we know so much more now of the personal power we have to change our brains.

Through brainscanning we can now see which parts of the brain are stimulated when we experience happiness and well-being. We can pin-point the type of thoughts that uplift us. We can observe how certain actions practised over only a few weeks activate feel-good hormones in our brains that energise, help us to trust more, to better focus and enjoy life.

Positive psychology specialises in the study of what we human beings do when we are happy, engaged and have found purpose in our lives. It has become clear that we can change our brain pathways and increase our zest for life by taking certain actions and making certain adjustments in our way of thinking.

We can create a successful and satisfying life way beyond our dreams. We can help people around us particularly the younger generation, provided we ourselves become role-models for well-being and happiness.



These well-being skills are small easily practised habits we can develop that change our brain environment and stimulate our feel good hormones dopamine and serotonin. These skills empower us to pursue a life that we can love and be proud of; they bring us to a higher level of honesty, fairness and genuine care for ourselves and all other living creatures in the universe. These lifeskills enable us to make a positive contribution in the world not at the expense of our own well-being but hand in hand with a flourishing and thriving personal existence.

This book presents seven areas of wellness skills easily developed. Some skills such as problem solving or assertiveness skills are useful in particular situations while other skills such as creating positive relationships, having selfkindness and being grateful empower our entire lives.

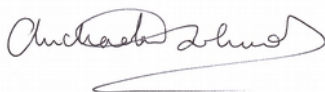
Each skill stands on its own, thus you can dip into this 'manual' at any place without prior knowledge. Each of the living skills presented has through research been shown to work really well for innumerable people. These are skills that I wish I would have known earlier in life in order to bring them to people who have ended up despairing and suicidal not realising that well-being and happiness lie within everyone's reach with a bit of encouragement and support.

We cannot choose for someone else. Each of us has a free choice whether to take on life enhancing and nourishing thinking and behaviour patterns. We each have the power to create a personal environment of peace, happiness and purpose within our minds and bodies that will guide us to choose optimism and care in everyday life and adverse situations.

This book shows how happiness and well-being are determined by the habits we choose to cultivate. You will find life-stories of people who have experienced adversity but used these life-skills to move beyond a life-crisis into lives full of well-being, happiness and hope. Specific **Brain Train** tasks will guide you to increase and permanently boost your happiness and care skills – provided you practise them!

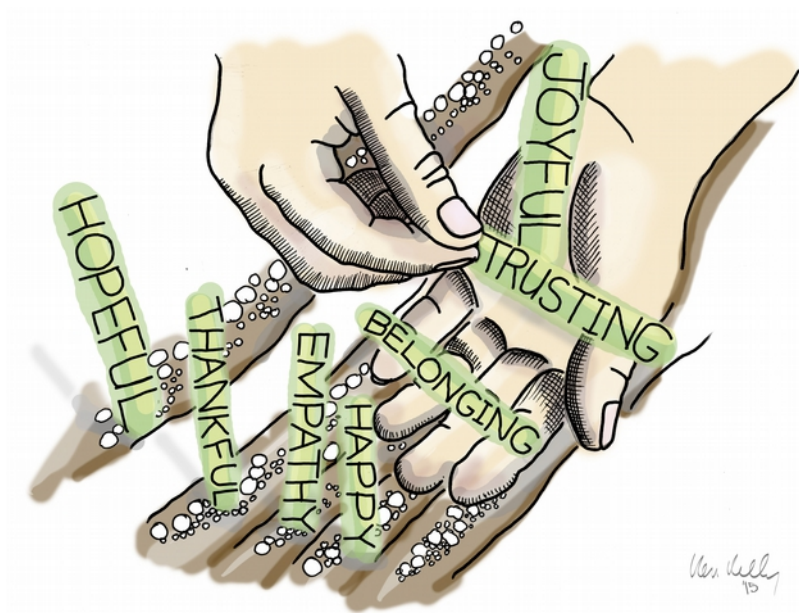
By you taking responsibility for cultivating your own happiness and well-being you will not only discover a higher energy level and better health, but you will also become an inspiration for other people to do the same.

*I wish you luck on this journey.*

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Michaela Avlund". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

---

PLEASE NOTE: To protect confidentiality, the names of the people who share their well-being stories have been changed.



## POSITIVE EMOTIONS AND GRATITUDE

*Do we really need to feel good?*

---

Feeling good is not a luxury, it is a necessity. Research clearly shows how often we are stressed and can burn ourselves out unless we proactively cultivate positive emotions.

## Do we really need to feel good?

Feeling good can be underestimated as childish or naive, but feeling good is a deciding factor when it comes to our personal happiness and health.

I was brought up not to pay too much attention to my feelings. Life was more about fulfilling daily tasks and 'being good' rather than being happy and fulfilled. Then after a disappointment in a close relationship, someone I trusted asked me 'What do you want?' I suddenly realised that I had

never really allowed myself to focus on my personal happiness.

I had supported other people's well-being but had not paid much attention to my personal aspirations and happiness.

Since then I have met numerous people who also find it difficult to allow themselves to pursue happiness for themselves. Pressures to be successful or liked can stop us from paying attention to the feel good factor in our lives.

Barbara Fredrickson<sup>2</sup> is an American professor who has researched this whole area of positive feelings and emotions. She discovered that positive emotions lead to high energy and

vibrant health. When we feel good we also tend to be more generous and creative. We enjoy every part of our lives – even the challenges. Positive emotions build up our capacity to overcome negative experiences and fight off anxiety and depression.

In Europe and North America depression and anxiety is on the increase, starting at a younger age than ever before (WHO)<sup>3</sup>. Interviews with young pop stars who have an abundance of fame and money reveal that they often live in a deep state of depression and become chemically dependant on drugs to stimulate the feel good hormones in their bodies. While this works for a while, sooner or later it tears down personal confidence and enjoyment to know that one cannot get through the day without alcohol or drugs.

Life is so much better when we feel good so why don't we just do what it takes to feel good?

**Cathal is one of the lucky ones who has survived years of dependency on alcohol and sometimes stronger drugs to deal with his negative feelings. He is thankful that he has found a healthier and more uplifting way of creating positive emotions as he is now a therapist who helps people to relax and enjoy better health. He explains;**

*I drank to numb the bad feelings but when you drink you numb everything, good and bad. I now realise that my negative feelings and thoughts are memories or a negative interpretation of what happened and not necessarily what other people experienced. I now know I have a choice how I view something and remember it.*

*Most people that have been on the road I have been on have lost everything. I still have a family, I still have the means of earning a living and I am grateful for that.*

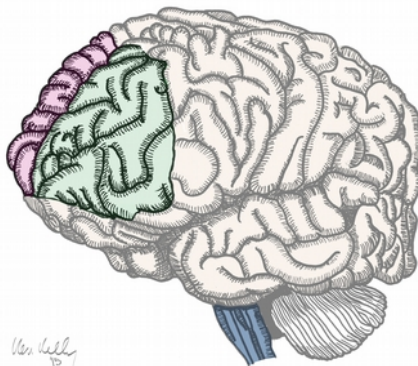
Of course we want to feel good, but sometimes life's chores and wounds seem to prevent us from exploring our potential. We may not realise how much power we have to create a wonderful life for ourselves.

## **Using our Positive Management Centre**

Scientists can now see what physically happens within our brains when we feel good and when we feel bad. Professor Richard Davidson has spent a lifetime investigating exactly what happens in the brain when we experience positive and negative emotions. He discovered a management centre at the very front of our brains called the Prefrontal Cortex. Here he

noticed activity in the left or the right area according to whether we feel good or bad and according to whether we focus on positive or negative thoughts.

The amazing discovery is that we can choose which part of our brain to 'feed' and nourish. Whatever type of thoughts we focus on activate either the **Left management centre** (highlighted in green) or the **Right management centre** of the brain (highlighted in red). Why is this important?



Unknown to ourselves we might automatically activate our negativity system. We human beings have a strong survival instinct and the constant stream of negative information from our surroundings activates our negativity bias. We need to counteract this overly activated survival system by deliberately nourishing the positivity home in our brains which will then

If we are not careful we keep activating the brain centre that leads to anxiety, worry and depression.



produce greater well-being.

**pages 12-24 missing**

**Gratitude oils the mechanism of the brain and its positive emotional life.**

The following skills can increase your happiness and well-being no bounds, once practised.

- 1. Recall good events in your life**
- 2. Keep a Gratitude Journal**
- 3. Write a Gratitude Letter**
- 4. Pause for Gratitude Contemplation**
- 5. Say 'Thank You'**

### **1. Recall Good Events in Your Life**

In my 6 week course, workshops and well-being getaways I always introduce the gratitude skill early on. Within thirty minutes I am sure to give participants an opportunity to recall something good in their lives. It can be something small or something big, it does not matter. What matters is that a person becomes aware that something good has happened to them recently.

In addition I would ask the participants to think about how they might have contributed to this experience. Sometimes that surprises people, but if for example I dwell on the beautiful sunrise I experienced this morning and how I might have contributed to that I might realise that 'yes' I did go out

of my way, I went down by the sea-shore for a little walk rather than stay in bed.

The reflection on what we did to put ourselves in the way of good experiences makes us aware of the power we have to direct ourselves towards many uplifting experiences.

## BRAIN TRAIN

### The Appreciation formula:

1.

Write down or think about something good that happened to you lately .....

.....

.....

.....

2.

Write down or think about how you helped to make that happen? .....

.....

.....

.....

**Example:**

*Something good.. My brother in Denmark sent me a lovely message on his birthday that he would have loved me to be there celebrating with him.*

*I helped make that happen by: sending him a text congratulating him and telling him how fortunate I feel to have him as my brother.*

If one wishes to take this further one might answer the following:

3. Why this event is important to me:

.....

.....

.....

**Example:**

*This is important to me because... I did not see my brother for 16 years as I lived very far away and could not get back home. Still he and his children were the first to collect me at the airport in the middle of a snowstorm the day when I did eventually get to go home. Also, whenever I*

*go home I know he will welcome me and want me to spend time with him and the family.*

## pages 28-35 missing

By holding on to a positive memory for 30 seconds we allow it to establish itself as a long-term memory in the hippocampus which is our memory store.

When we repeatedly dwell on good experiences, little by little we build up a nice store of positive experiences which we then can draw on when we experience problems and meet adversities. This enables us to access an optimistic outlook which might otherwise escape us when we are overcome by

adverse circumstances.

## BRAIN TRAIN

### Gratitude contemplation :

1. Simply be still while noticing your own breathing for 30 seconds allowing yourself to APPRECIATE BEING ALIVE. Do this a few times over the day.

or

2. Allow yourself to focus on some good event or something you like in your environment and simply, **Sit with that experience for 30 seconds.**

Pausing several times a day whilst focusing on a good event is extremely conducive to creating many new positive pathways in the brain. **This deliberately chosen gratitude pause increases serotonin and dopamine activities which activate our immune system.**

We can experience a wonderful mood lift and build up stamina to deal with life's challenges in the most beneficial manner.

## 5. Say 'Thank You'

The neuroscientist Richard Davidson recommends to simply looking someone in the eye and say thank you as a way of creating positive emotional brain activity. This connects us to other people in an uplifting and bonding manner. It signals to the brain and immune system that all is well and that the world is a good place.

His research shows that when a person is being thanked they automatically feel like passing on that sentiment to others around them. It is like a chain reaction of positive emotions. It is simple and it works.

### BRAIN TRAIN

#### Saying 'Thank You':

Look out for opportunities to thank people. Look the person in the eye and if appropriate shake their hand or hug them and say 'thank you' for something you appreciate.

#### The Gratitude Dance

*For fun Matt decided to do a crazy little Gratitude Dance in a*

*public place and asked his girl-friend to film it. They uploading it on You Tube and got a lot of hits.*

*Then somebody funded them to travel to as many countries as possible to perform and film this short, crazy little dance. In this You Tube clip you can see how people joined him in the Gratitude Dance wherever he went.*

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ri9PpFVyVhE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ri9PpFVyVhE)



## **Treat Yourself to a Gratitude Dance**

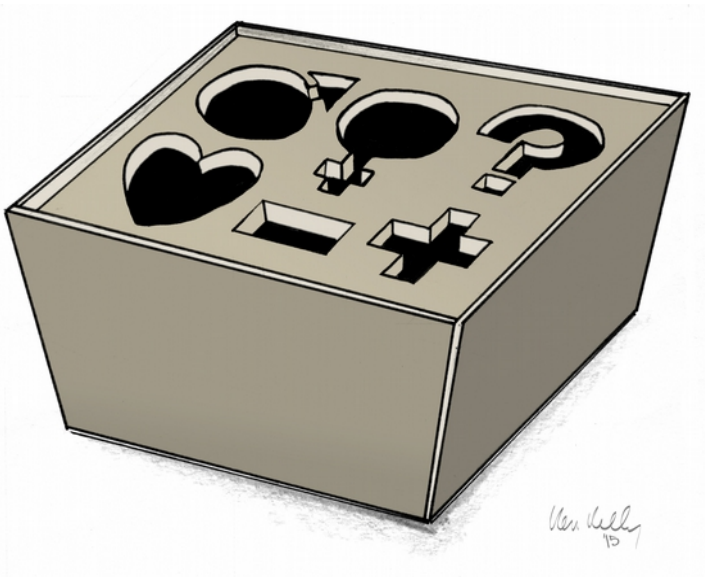
First thing in the morning, in private if you like, do a little gratitude dance. You might be surprised at how powerful this is.

*When I was growing up I loved it when I was alone in the house. I put on music in the sittingroom and danced around. I still enjoy it – when I remember to do it.*

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## CHAPTER SEVEN



### PROBLEM SOLVING

---

Personal or Social Problem-Solving concerns our ability to keep abreast of our personal and relationship problems. A build-up of these can have dire consequences on our mental and physical health, but there is a formula, there are solutions.

## **Personal Problem-Solving**

Problem-solving is often associated with business or mathematical skills but research provides ample evidence that

Personal problem-solving has also been called Social Problem-Solving<sup>2</sup> because it concerns our ability to be in relationship with others, with the world around us and ourselves.

good personal problem-solving skills increase our emotional intelligence<sup>1</sup>, our confidence and our ability to be optimistic.

Some people will naturally possess these skills but they can be learned by all of us. There is a simple formula that has been observed in people

who are successful at personal problem-solving.

**Good problem-solving skills  
tend to decrease depression, hopelessness  
and suicidal tendencies<sup>2</sup>.**

People with depression, which we know is on the increase in our society, tend to have an overload of unsolved problems.

Helpful hormones are activated when we take an optimistic 'can-do' approach even if initially we do not know the solution to our problems.

However, when we are negative or try to avoid our problems

When our organs function at their optimum our immune system is being strengthened. We feel less pain as our bodies and our brains build up resilience.

the brain freezes and our system goes into defence mode. This increases the flow of adrenalin and builds up cortisol. Our organs are now on the alert. When our system is on stand-by for fight, flight or freeze over time this can have a very depressing effect on our brain and body.

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**Happiness Skills is an inspiring yet practical account of the day to day skills you need to keep yourself happy and well.**

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**By following these empathetic and wellbeing skills based on Positive Psychology you increase your ability to understand yourself, people all around you and your place in the universe.**



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