**Session Two: Emotional Awareness & Positive Events**

|  |
| --- |
| **Objectives:** 1. Emotional Awareness (15 min)
2. Noticing Positive Events (10 min)
3. Savoring Positive Emotion (5 min)
4. Home practice overview (5 min)
 |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |

1. **Emotional Awareness (15 minutes)**

As a reminder, our goal for the CYPRESS program is to build skills for increasing positive emotions, even in the context of stress. One helpful skill for working toward this goal is to review what is called emotional awareness. All emotions serve a purpose or function, which means no emotion is necessarily bad. It’s completely natural and healthy to experience a wide spectrum of emotions, and all types of emotional experiences can be useful in some way. Our goal is to help you create more space for emotions that are supportive your long-term happiness, health, stability, and relationship satisfaction.  Let’s look more closely at emotions for a few minutes.

**Function of Emotions**

***Do most of you recognize these characters?***These are all characters from Disney-Pixar’s movie, *Inside Out…*and they represent our core emotions. However, we know emotions can be more complicated and more specific than this. For instance, the anger you feel towards a family member might feel like *frustration* if you need them to answer a question or text right away but they are non-responsive. That feeling of frustration feels a lot different than the *rage you* might experience if, near the end of an already stressful and terrible day, another car almost runs you off the road on the highway. *Rage* and *Frustration* are both types of anger, but we experience them very differently, and they are the result of very different actions or stimuli. Ultimately, there are countless ways to describe and label and feel each or our emotional experiences. So how do we make sense of all the emotions we feel?

One way researchers think about emotions is as existing on two scales. The first scale, called “valence,” is probably the most familiar one to you: it’s the spectrum of how negative or positive an emotion is. Emotions can be either negative or positive, and they can vary in degree along the spectrum as to how negative or how positive they are. So deep sadness would have a negative valence and be considered a very negative emotion, while sheer joy would be a very positive one.

Does that make sense?

The second scale is how “activating” an emotion is. You can think of this as running on a spectrum from high to low in terms of how active or energized the emotion is. For instance, someone who’s feeling drowsy or passive is in a low state, while someone who has just been surprised is in a very high state.

* **Where does Sadness fall on the chart?**
	+ Low Negative (Participants may argue for high negative. Normalize that different people might experience the same emotion with different levels of activation, but that sadness characterized by depression, lethargy, and sluggishness would be low negative)
* **What about Anger?**
	+ High Negative
* **Disgust?**
	+ High Negative (Participants may argue for low negative. Normalize that different people might experience the same emotion with different levels of activation, but that disgust experience as nauseating or repulsive would be high negative).
* **Joy?**
	+ High Positive
* **Fear?**
	+ High Negative

All of these emotions serve a purpose or function, which means no emotion is necessarily bad. We don’t want you thinking that just because we’re labeling an emotion as “negative” or “low” that it’s wrong to experience negative or low emotions. It’s completely natural and healthy to experience a wide spectrum of emotions, and all types of emotional experiences can be useful in some way. We just want to help you feel the ones that are best for your long-term happiness, health, stability, and relationship satisfaction.

***How are emotions “useful?” What purpose do you think they serve?***

* **Emotions can give us important information about a situation we’re in!** What you feel in a moment or from a stimulus can help you understand what you need or value, it can help you make decisions about everything from what to eat for breakfast to when to remove yourself from a situation where you feel threatened or unsafe.
* **Emotions help us understand others and help others understand us.** If someone expresses or demonstrates an emotion, you have a better sense of what they’re feeling or how they’re perceiving something. Similarly other people can understand you better through your own emotional expression.
* **Emotions can motivate our behavior so we can plan for action**. Feeling something can help lead to doing something. Fear can motivate you to run away when you feel unsafe. Sadness can motivate you to withdraw and heal. Anger can motivate you to stand up for, demand, or protect something that’s valuable to you. Emotions also motivate us to seek out or lean into activities, people, or things that make us feel happy or positive (like a fun date with your partner) and shy away from things that make us feel negative.
* Sometimes, it can be difficult to benefit from our emotions; especially if we don’t know what emotion we are experiencing! How would you know to minimize situations that make you sad or angry if you couldn’t recognize sadness or anger in yourself? **Thankfully, our bodies help to clue us into our emotional response.**
* Sometimes when people have a positive event they feel the positive emotion in their bodies (for example, stretched out and relaxed muscles if content, jittery and restless with excitement). So when trying to understand our emotions it can be helpful to listen to our bodies.

Now that we know more about the function of emotion, let’s list some ways each group of emotions in our axis can prove helpful to us.

**Utility of Low-Negative Emotions**

Let’s say you’re feeling a low-negative emotion, like you’re sluggish, tired, or blue—how might you recognize that this is the emotion you’re experiencing? Or how might your partner be able to tell that you’re feeling this way?

* Trouble getting motivated to do everyday tasks
* Withdrawing from relationships—cancelling plans, not participating.
* Not being expressive or communicative

What is the purpose of a low-negative emotion like boredom or sadness? What can these emotions motivate us to do in our relationships?

* Boredom could be a sign you’re in a rut and you and your partner need to liven things up.
* Boredom or sadness could also be a sign that you or your partner haven’t been taking care of yourselves or attending to your needs—plan something that makes you feel good.
* Could be a sign that you’re going through a troubling time and need emotional support. ‘

**Utility of High-Negative Emotions**

What about high negative emotions like fear or anger? What do they do for us, and what information or motivation do they provide in a relationship?

* Fear is an indication that you’re in a dangerous situation you need to remove yourself from. If you are in a setting where you’re afraid—a street that feels unsafe, your fear may signal that you need to remove yourself from the situation immediately.
* Fear or anger can really fuel us. If you and your partner find that you’re righteously upset about something, that adrenaline rush can power you to push through difficulties and obstacles.
* Fear and anger are indicators that something important to you has been threatened or violated.

Why might it be risky to regularly experience fear, anxiety, or anger, or to have that be your most common emotional state?

* It’s physically and mentally exhausting, not sustainable!
* Harder to practice self-control, may make it difficult to remain rational or focused.
* Long-term fear, anger, or anxiety may be indicators that you are in an unhealthy or threatening situation you need to remove yourself from.

**Utility of High-Positive Emotions**

**What are the benefits of experiencing a high-positive emotion like joy or excitement?**

* **Obviously, being excited or joyful feels awesome**, so it makes sense that you would want your relationship to be exciting. A lot of people describe as “feeling alive,” a worthy and desirable goal.
* **Excitement is incredibly motivating**. It’s easier to take on and complete a project at work or at home when you’re excited about it. Or think about how much better your workouts at the gym are on days you’re feeling really driven and motivated?
* And because we can experience joy or excitement, **it often encourages us to do more things that make us feel that joy or excitement,** meaning we can make time for things that bring us happiness.

**What would be the risks of feeling joy or excitement all the time?**

* High positive emotional states and high negative emotional states actually have some similar drawbacks. Living in any kind of “high” state can be really physically exhausting—you’re so over-stimulated that you’re going to crash eventually.
* And when you’re really jazzed about something, it can be hard to be logical, focused, or thoughtful. It threatens your ability to make healthy decisions, plus the exhaustive, high-adrenaline state can leave you so exhausted that you become volatile.
* You can also become obsessed with seeking excitement, which makes it impossible for you to appreciate the little things that make you happy. Not only do you risk rejecting responsibilities and commitments, but you neglect things about relationship you actually value just because they’re not “exciting or not.”
* There are also diminishing returns on the things that excite you. If every weekend, you and your partner went and saw your favorite band perform at your favorite venue, and afterwards went to your favorite bar for drinks, it wouldn’t take long until those things got less exciting, ultimately giving you less joy. You’d lose your ability to be thrilled by them.

**Utility of Low-Positive Emotion**

What function does a low activation-positive emotion serve?

* Experiencing calm or serenity is a nice signal that everything is going well and that everything is going well in your relationship. It is, in many ways, the ideal state because you’re experiencing lots of positive emotion without the loss of control, focus, or energy of high activation emotions. So throughout this program, we will focus on the benefits of low-positive emotions and teach you skills for increasing your awareness and experience of low-positive emotions in your everyday life.

**Labeling your Emotions**

When you ask a person how they’re feeling, some people tend to think of their emotions as either good or bad. Other people are more nuanced in how their emotional vocabularies are. These terms get much more specific in terms of what they tell you about someone’s emotional experience. For example, compare someone who describes themselves as feeling good or bad, with someone who describes themselves as feeling optimistic or disappointed. Having a broad emotional vocabulary helps us process a wide spectrum of emotions.

Which brings us to the concept of emotional labeling- the ability to identify and label an emotional experience with a high degree of precision and specificity. Research has found that people who are skilled at identifying, labeling, and differentiating their emotions with precision tend to be less likely to be overwhelmed when experiencing intense distress, and they’re less likely to use maladaptive coping strategies like binge eat, drink, use aggression, or self injury. Not surprisingly then, these individuals also tend to experience less severe anxiety and depressive disorders. Why is emotional differentiation so beneficial for us?

First, being precise about labeling your emotions gives you more detailed information about what action is best needed for dealing with situation. For example, if I were feeling jealous, I could ask myself what about the situation makes me feel jealous about someone, as opposed to just feeling bad. Second, the act of simply putting your feelings into specific emotional terms can help reduce distress.

**Emotion Labeling in Phobic Individuals**

For example, a team of psychologists performed a study on people with spider phobias. In this study, they had 88 participants who had spider phobias take part in a study in which all participants had to go through 10 steps to approach the spider. These steps began with standing 5-ft away from the spider and escalated up to actually touching the spider continuously.

In this study, participants were randomly assigned to one of four treatment groups. In the emotion labeling group, participants were asked to create and speak a sentence at each step that included a negative word or two to describe their emotional response to spider. For example: “I feel anxious the disgusting tarantula will jump on me.” In the reappraisal group, participants were asked to create and speak a sentence at each step describing a way of thinking about the spider in order to feel less negatively about it. For example: “Looking at the little spider is not dangerous”. In the distraction group, participants were asked to create and speak a sentence including an object or piece of furniture found in their home and a room or location in which the furniture is found. For example: “There is a television in front of my couch in the den. ” Finally, in the control group, participants were not asked to create or speak any sentences as they were going through the steps. They just went through the 10 exposure steps, getting increasingly close to the spider.

Participants were brought back for a post-test one week later, and were asked to go through the same 10 steps again to approach the spider. At both assessments, participants’ skin conductance response was assessed. Skin conductance is an indirect way of measuring physiological symptoms of fear. Here are the findings for change in skin conductance from the immediate post test on the day of treatment and their skin conductance at the posttest 1 week later. The bars reflect the different treatment groups. As you can see, those in the affect labeling group showed lower levels of skin conductance at the 1-week posttest relative to those who were in the other treatment groups who showed similar levels of skin conductance on day 1 relative to 1-week later. These findings support the idea that putting your feelings into words and being aware of your negative feelings can help you cope more effectively in the face of stress.

The benefits of putting your feelings into words may be particularly relevant for medicine. In medicine, you may encounter experiences that are really high in emotional intensity, and these intense emotions can sometimes lead you to ruminate about that negative experience and carry that experience with you throughout the day. This can be problematic because it can distract you from paying attention to what’s important in the present moment, like interacting with different patients or even interacting with your loved ones. When you are confronted with stress and distress, take a moment to stop and label the specific emotions that you are experiencing, just like the spider phobic individuals in the study, and this simple act of labeling your emotions can help to take reduce the intensity of that experience and can allow you to cope more effectively with it.

One important part of developing the skill of emotional labeling is to be able to notice and identify when you’re experiencing a body sensation or thought that’s connected to an emotion and recognize those are CLUES. That’s what we will be focusing on our home practice this week. You will choose one event each day to focus on and practice paying attention to your thoughts, feelings, and body sensations to help you label specific emotions.

When you recognize and label the specific emotion you are experiencing, this can help you recognize what action is best needed for dealing with the situation

1. **Noticing Positive Events (10 minutes)**

The next skill we will be focusing on this session is to notice the good things.

Oftentimes, we can go through the day in autopilot mode, without really being in touch with our emotions and what we’re experiencing. This can be especially true if it's a work day, you're going through your daily grind, and you didn’t do anything particularly fun or exciting. However, there are always small positive moments going on in our daily lives, and building the habit of being attuned to these positive moments can have a meaningful impact in terms of changing your experience of the day, your stress, and your overall well-being.

It’s especially important to build the habit of noticing the positives in life, because humans have the tendency to exhibit a negativity bias.

The negativity bias is the tendency for humans to pay more attention to and give more weight to negative information over positive information. We spend a lot of time ruminating about what went wrong in the past or worry about what can go wrong in the future.

In fact, decades of research in psychology and neuroscience has found that negative information: captures our attention more easily, is processed more deeply, elicits greater bodily arousal and neural responding, and is flagged more prominently in our memory relative to positive information.

It seems as if our brains are like Velcro for negative experiences but Teflon for positive ones. When we experience fear, anger, resentment, violence, and so on, our brain cells attach to these like Velcro and refuse to let go. But when it comes to positive experiences, like beauty, joy, gratitude, and so on, our brains are like Teflon. The positive experiences seem to slide off us quickly and don’t leave the same imprint as the negative experiences.

And this might have been advantageous in our evolutionary past, such that it would've been beneficial for our survival to be vigilant to threats and predators in their environment. However, for modern humans, our negativity bias does not tend to focus on things that are pertinent to our survival. Instead, we ruminate about something stupid we may have said in a meeting, or obsess over an email to a supervisor. This modern type of negativity bias can be harmful for our health. Our stress systems evolved at a time when people oftentimes did not live past the age of 30. Nowadays though, given our extended lifespans, it’s important to develop habits for counteracting the effects of this negativity, as the chronic exposure to stress that many of us experience in our modern lives can really be detrimental for our long-term health.

But there’s hope.

Even when life is going badly, there are always positive things happening. The key is to notice and appreciate small positive events. Noticing positive events involves simply taking a moment to recognize the positive events in your life. Some examples of noticing small events include: a good cup of coffee/tea, having fun with a pet, enjoying a good conversation with a friend, or appreciating a meaningful interaction with a patient.

It's important to actively make a point of noticing positive events, because when positive events happen, one common response that people have is to feel temporarily happy, but then quickly “dampen” down their feelings of joy and happiness, by dismissing positive events or start thinking about the next thing on their to do list. For instance, a student who got a good grade on a test may feel good for a moment, but then quickly think something like “the test must have been easy,” “I won’t do well on this other, more important, test” or “I still have so much to do.” People also have the tendency to respond to positive events by quickly redirecting their attention to the next thing on their to-do list. However, an alternative response is to positive events is to savor and enjoy the moment.

How can experiencing a positive event help you cope with stress and experience more good things?

Small events can have big effects. That cup of coffee or song on the radio may only last a short time, but it can actually have an effect on your entire day. According to many research studies, being in a good mood even briefly can:

* Help your body's stress responses settle down when they're stuck in high gear.
* Interrupt you when you're caught up in negative thoughts that just go in circles.
* Encourage you to explore, learn things, or make contact with other people.

All of these benefits can stick around long after the positive event is done. The point is, positive emotions that come with the experience of noticing positive events can provide a momentary break from the stress, they can help you feel replenished so you can return to coping with the stress, and they can enable you to stay engaged in coping with the stress for a longer period of time.

**Activity # 1**: **Identifying three good things**

Take a minute or two to think back over the past 24 hours and identify three good things that happened to you yesterday. These can be things that went well, things that you enjoyed, or things that inspired a sense of satisfaction and well-being. Don’t worry about identifying the most positive thing, it can be anything, big or small, that made you smile, reminded you of how pleasant life can be, or was a pleasant experience. Even everyday activities that you may not otherwise think about can bring about lots of positive emotions. For example, someone making you laugh, laying under the warm soft covers, enjoying a tasty meal, or spending time with your friends. For each good thing, we want you to take a moment to reflect on why you think each good thing happened and why you felt good about it.

**The Science Behind the Three Good Things Activity**

One of the initial studies on the 3 good things activity was conducted by Marty Seligman. You may remember Marty Seligman if you took intro psych, he is known for his landmark research in depression on learned helplessness in the 1960s and 1970s, and he is also considered to be the father of positive psychology.

I’ll show you the first study that Dr. Seligman did testing this 3 good things activity. In this study, participants were randomly assigned them to one of two conditions: either write about 3 good things every night for one week (the activity you just completed) or write about their early memories every night for one week (a control condition). The researchers then followed up with participants 1 month, 3 months, and 6 months later to assess their happiness and depression.

I’ll show you the first study that Dr. Seligman did testing this 3 good things activity. In this study, participants were randomly assigned them to one of two conditions: either write about 3 good things every night for one week (the activity you just completed) or write about their early memories every night for one week (a control condition). The researchers then followed up with participants 1 month, 3 months, and 6 months later to assess their happiness and depression.

What they found was that simply asking participants to complete the 3 good things activity and write about 3 good things every night for just one week led participants to show increased happiness and reduced depressive symptoms, 1 month, 3 months, and even 6 months later.

Beyond the initial study, there have now been many additional studies done, with thousands of participants, that have assessed the effectiveness of this intervention. In 2013, Boiler and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis to review the efficacy of this type of intervention on well-being and depression. They only included high-quality research studies in their meta-analysis (that is, studies that were randomized trials, with a control condition etc). They found a demonstrable effect of this type of positive psychology intervention on improving well-being and depression across the studies. This intervention has now been implemented in a wide-range of populations including K-12 school teachers, police officers and even the US military.

**Activity #2**: **Spread the Joy (Savor)**

Now, turn to the person next to you and take turns sharing one of the 3 good things you listed on your index cards. Some examples might include a rewarding interaction with a patient or a thought-provoking discussion in class. Don’t overthink it—it can even be something as simple as the warm feeling you get after walking inside on a cold day. Discuss the positive emotions you felt during that event and even the positive emotion you feel right now in remembering the event.

1. **Savoring Positive Emotion (5 minutes)**

The final skill we will be focusing on this session is savoring – this is building off the skill of noticing positive events to expand on the positive emotions experienced. The goal of savoring is to maximize your focus on as many aspects of the current experience as you can. You want to avoid rushing through the experience while you think about many other things at the same time. Many people often respond to success by rushing forward to thinking about or even doing the next event; our goal is to help you sit quietly and appreciate these good moments, rather than spinning so quickly into active mode. One way to savor an event is to focus in on each specific aspect of the experience. If you are enjoying a sunny day, you can think about the warmth on your skin, the brightness of colors gleaming in the sunlight, and the ease of not wearing a heavy raincoat. If you are enjoying a note from a friend, you can picture your friend’s face, read the card over slowly, and appreciate the care that went into their words and choice of the card, and think about a nice place to put the card in your home. If you are enjoying a meal, you can slow down, inhale the wonderful aromas, slowly taste the first bite, consider which ingredients are contributing to the flavor, and think about the beauty of the food on the plate.

Beyond taking a moment to savor a positive experience in the moment, in order to really get the most you can out of the positive events and emotions you experience, you can do something to *extend* the event over time. Some ways to extend positive emotions include taking a moment to stop and savor it, writing about it, thinking about it later and re-experiencing the positive emotions you felt, or sharing your positive event with others or on social media. That way, when you share with others, you can relive the experience with them and every time you get a response to your positive event, you can extend the positive emotion even longer. When you relive a positive experience from the past, be sure to allow yourself to fully experience the positive emotion again and enjoy it. During a stressful situation, you can do this and recall a positive emotion from your past, the associated emotions, and savor the positive feelings.

It can be important to notice and savor the small positive moments in medicine to remember and reinforce why you got into this field in the first place. It’s easy with the stress, long hours, and paperwork in medicine to lose sight of what makes your work meaningful and fulfilling and for the small positive moments to fade into the background. This is a big contributor to why people end up getting burnt out from their work. That’s why you should actively make a point to try to notice and savor the small positive moments in medicine, including; positive interactions with patients and their families, interesting cases, learning experiences, etc These behaviors can help you sustain a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction in your work over time.

Savoring is something you can easily infuse in your daily life that is free, does not take a lot of time (everyone can take a minute to stop and savor something nice in their lives), and you don’t have to change anything in your life. You don’t have to go to a 5-star restaurant to be able to savor your food. The easiest way for most people to start savoring in life tends to be taking a moment to savor your cup of coffee in the morning. Another easy way to infuse savoring into your life is take a moment as you wash your hands to enjoy the warmth of the water and think of something positive that happened to you that day.

1. **Overview of Home Practice (5 minutes)**

For this session, we would like you to practice the skills of noticing positive events and building your emotional awareness. For your home practice, you’ll be asked to keep a positive events log and an emotion log.

**Session 2: Home Practice**

1. **Emotional Awareness Log**

**Instructions**: Practice paying attention to your thoughts, feelings, and body sensations. Choose one event each day to focus on and fill in the blocks below. The event could be something that gave you a comfortable emotion, or an uncomfortable emotion.

|  |
| --- |
| EVENT (What happened?): \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ |
| FEELINGS/EMOTIONS | **THOUGHTS** | **BODY SENSATIONS** (*body temperature, stomach, muscle aches, ease, etc.)* |
|  |  |  |

1. **Positive Events Log**

This exercise is one way of being more aware of the good things that happen to you. It is designed to help you notice and remember positive events that occur throughout your day. Each day, at night before bed if you can, write down one or more things that were positive, went well, or made you feel good that day. These things can be ordinary and small in importance. If you can think of more than one – great! But try to come up with at least one.

* One **positive event** that I noticed today was:
* I was/was not (circle one) aware of positive feelings *while the event was happening.*
* These moods, feelings and thoughts accompanied the event:
* My thoughts or feelings now as I write this down are: