

# 10 Clever Tricks to Trigger Positive Emotions

**By Richard Wiseman**

People who see the glass half-full are certainly happier than the pessimists of the world, and learning to think positively is worthwhile. However, changing the way you think can be surprisingly tricky, especially when the going gets tough. What if there were a way—a shortcut or hack—that positively affected how you feel when you just can't seem to shake the blues?

A few years ago, I came across a simple idea that has been validated in hundreds of experiments and has given rise to quick and effective exercises that can help you feel happier, avoid anxiety, increase your willpower, deepen relationships and boost confidence. Perhaps most surprising of all, it does not involve trying to change how you think.

The idea dates back to the turn of the 20th century and to the work of Victorian philosopher William James. Working at Harvard University, James proposed a radical new theory about the link between thinking and behavior. According to conventional wisdom, your thoughts and feelings cause you to behave in certain ways. Feeling happy makes you smile, and feeling sad makes you frown. James wondered whether the exact opposite might also be true, namely that the way you behave can change how you feel.

According to James's theory, forcing your face into a smile should make you feel happy, and frowning should make you feel sad. James realized that if his theory were true, people should be able to create any feeling they desired simply by acting "as if" they were experiencing that emotion. Although the potential power of his idea clearly energized James (he often referred to it as "bottled lightning"), it was years ahead of its time and received scant attention from his fellow academics.

In the late 1960s, psychologist James Laird from the University of Rochester stumbled across James's theory and decided to test it. Laird knew that he couldn't simply ask people to smile and then report how they felt, because they might guess what the experiment was about and play along.

To overcome the problem, Laird advertised for volunteers to take part in a study on the electrical activity of facial muscles. When the volunteers arrived at the laboratory, Laird placed electrodes between their eyebrows and at the corners of their mouths. The electrodes were fake, but the clever cover story enabled Laird to discreetly manipulate his volunteers' faces into a smile or frown.

To create a frown, the volunteers were asked to pull together the two electrodes between their eyebrows. For the happy expression, they were asked to draw back the electrodes at the corners of their mouths. After they had contorted their faces into the required positions, participants were asked how they felt. The results were remarkable. Exactly as predicted by James, the volunteers felt happier when they forced their faces into smiles and sadder when they were frowning.

Curious about this remarkable finding, other scientists started to carry out their own versions of

Laird's groundbreaking experiment. Rather than repeatedly placing fake electrodes on people's faces, each laboratory produced its own version of the study.

Inspired by photographers who encourage people to smile by getting them to say, "Cheese," University of Michigan researchers asked volunteers repeatedly to make an "ee" sound (as in easy) to force their faces into smiles, or an "eu" sound (as in yule) to produce expressions nearer to disgust. Similarly, researchers in Germany were investigating how to teach people who were paralyzed below the neck to write, and asked volunteers either to support pencils horizontally between their teeth (thus forcing their faces into a smile) or hold pencils between their lips (thus pulling their faces into a frown).

Time and again, the results revealed that James's theory was correct, with volunteers who repeatedly chanted "ee" or supported pencils between their teeth suddenly feeling much happier. In short, behaving "as if" you were experiencing a certain emotion triggers that same emotion.

Other researchers have set out to discover whether the "as if" principle also worked in other areas of everyday life. Results have shown that very small changes in your actions can have a fast and long-lasting effect on your happiness, motivation, willpower, creativity and personality. So why not adopt more positive actions in your life?

Here are 10 positive-action exercises to try:

## **1. Feeling Happy**

There is more to lifting your mood than forcing your face into a brief, unfelt smile that finishes in the blink of an eye. Instead:

- Relax the muscles in your forehead and cheeks, and let your mouth drop slightly open.
- Contract the muscles near the corners of your mouth, drawing them back toward your ears. Make the smile as wide as possible and extend your eyebrow muscles slightly upward. Hold the resulting expression for about 20 seconds.

Try to incorporate this mood-brightening exercise into your daily routine by, for example, smiling just before you answer the telephone or setting a reminder on your computer.

## **2. Moving On**

Struggling to get over an upsetting choice you had to make? Researcher Xiuping Li from the National University of Singapore Business School asked each participant in a study to write down a recent decision he or she regretted. Li then asked some of the participants to seal their regrets in an envelope. Those who did so then reported feeling significantly better about their past decisions. Although they were just acting on a physically symbolic closure, their actions helped them reach psychological closure.

Next time you want some help getting over the loss of a client or a bad business decision, write a brief description of what happened on a piece of paper, put the paper in an envelope, and kiss the

past goodbye. And if you really want to have fun, reach for the matches and convert your envelope into a pile of ashes.

### **3. The Power of Secrets**

The more couples get to know one another, the more they disclose personal information. Psychologist Arthur Aron with the State University of New York at Stony Brook wondered whether asking two people to disclose personal information (and so acting “as if” they were more intimate) would make them feel especially close. Aron paired strangers, gave them a set of 36 questions that allowed them to open up about increasingly private aspects of their lives and then had them rate how they felt about each other. As predicted, the questions promoted a sense of intimacy and attraction. When using this technique to deepen your relationship with a colleague, family member or friend, take things one step at a time and make sure you’re both comfortable with the conversation.

Here are 10 sample questions from Aron’s experiment:

- Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?
- Would you like to be famous? In what way?
- Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? Why?
- What would constitute a perfect day for you?
- When did you last sing to yourself? To someone else?
- If you were able to live to the age of 90 and retain either the mind or body of a 30-year-old for the last 60 years of your life, which would you want?
- What is your most treasured memory?
- What is your most terrible memory?
- For what in your life do you feel most grateful?
- If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?

### **4. Pull Me–Push You**

If you are dieting, try behaving as if you don’t like unhealthy food. Research shows that pushing an object away from you (and so behaving as if you didn’t like it) makes you dislike the object. Whereas, pulling it toward you (behaving as if you liked it) makes you feel far more positively about it. Next time you are confronted with a plate of sugary or fried snacks, simply push the plate away from you and feel the temptation fade.

Conversely, if you are in sales and want to make prospective clients feel more positive about a product, try placing it on a table in front of them and encouraging them to slide it closer.

### **5. Muscle Magic**

People who are highly motivated often tense their muscles as they prepare to spring into action. But research from Iris Hung, an associate professor of marketing at the National University of Singapore, has shown that the opposite is also true—you can boost your willpower simply by tensing your muscles. Next time you feel your willpower draining away, try, for example, making a fist, contracting your biceps, pressing your thumb and first finger together, or gripping a pen in your hand.

Similarly, if you want to persevere with something, try crossing your arms. Ron Friedman, social psychologist and founder of ignite80, asked people to tackle difficult anagrams with their arms either crossed or resting on their thighs. By folding their arms, people were acting as if they were persistent, and they continued trying to solve the puzzle for nearly twice as long as those with their hands on their thighs.

## **6. Breaking Habits**

You can help crack unwanted habits by behaving as if you are someone who never gets stuck in a routine. Psychologists Ben Fletcher and Karen Pine from the University of Hertfordshire in the U.K. carried out research in which people trying to lose weight were asked to adopt a more flexible approach to life (by, for example, being asked to stop watching television for a day or traveling to work using different routes). These small changes helped people break their bad patterns. Try to undo unwanted habits by behaving as if you are a flexible person and carrying out one of the following every few days:

- Try an unusual form of food.
- Visit a new art gallery or museum.
- Go to a shop that you have never visited before.
- Make time to see a film that you don't think you will enjoy.

## **7. How to Negotiate**

The chairs that you sit in affect your behavior, which in turn affects how you think. In a study by Joshua Ackerman, an assistant professor of marketing at the MIT Sloan School of Management, volunteers sat on either hard chairs or soft-cushioned chairs while paired with strangers to role-play the negotiation of selling a new car. Those in the hard chairs sat rigidly, while those sitting in the soft chairs felt comfortable—and sure enough, their behavior was significantly different. Those in the hard chairs were more inflexible in their negotiations and demanded a higher price for the car.

Hard furniture creates hard behavior, which underlines the importance of having soft furnishings in your home and office (except for when you need to be the bad cop).

## **8. The Power of Warm**

From an early age, we associate the feeling of warmth with safety and security (think hugs and open fires), and coldness with unfriendliness (think “getting the cold shoulder” and “icy stare”). The “as if” principle predicts that warming people up should make them feel far more friendly. Research

conducted by University of Colorado psychologist Lawrence Williams suggests that this is indeed the case. Williams handed volunteers either a hot cup of coffee or a cold drink, asked them to read a short description of a stranger, and then asked them to rate the stranger's personality. The volunteers who had been warmed up by the coffee thought that the stranger seemed much friendlier than those who had been clutching iced drinks.

If you are trying to befriend someone, skip the frozen cocktails in an air-conditioned bar and instead opt for a steaming mug of tea in front of a roaring fire.

## **9. All Together Now**

Want to get a group to bond together quickly and believe in a single cause? Get them to act in unison. Assistant professor Scott Wiltermuth from the University of Southern California gathered groups of three volunteers. Some of the groups were asked to walk around the university campus normally, while others were formed into a small army and asked to march around the same route in step. In another part of the study, groups were asked to listen to a national anthem, and others were asked to sing along and move in time to the music. The people in each of the groups were then asked to play a board game in which they could choose to help or hinder one another. Those who had been walking in sync and singing in unison quickly bonded, and they were significantly more likely to help one another during the game.

People who have bonded together often act in unison. Similarly, acting in unison helps people bond together.

## **10. Power Posing**

A study done at Columbia University discovered that when people are put into "power poses," they feel more confident, have higher levels of testosterone (a chemical associated with dominance) and lower levels of cortisol (a chemical associated with stress).

So if you are sitting down, lean back, look up and interlock your fingers behind your head. If you are standing up, then place your feet flat on the floor and push your shoulders back and your chest forward.

Or, if you haven't got time to strike a powerful pose, just make a fist. Psychologist Thomas Schubert from the University of Oslo asked a group of men to rate how confident they felt, then to form their hand into a fist for a few seconds, and then to re-rate their confidence. The volunteers' bodies influenced their brains, with the men enjoying a significant boost in confidence because they had spent a few moments forming a fist.