

# Tipping Toward Happiness by Patty Onderko

You don't need a doctorate to understand that it's better to be more positive than negative. But in 2003 two Ph.D.s set out to determine exactly how much positivity is ideal. Psychologists Barbara Fredrickson (a pioneer of the Positive Psychology movement) and Marcial Losada used a mathematical model to discern the "tipping point" when it comes to positivity—the exact moment when you've got enough to outweigh the negative and help you to operate at your happiest and most successful. The duo pinpointed the ratio of positivity to negativity that allowed people to flourish, which they defined as "feeling good and doing good."

"To flourish means to live within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth and resilience," they wrote in their oft-cited 2005 paper, which revealed the ratio and was published in the *American Psychologist*.

The life-changing ratio? 3-to-1. If you think, respond, speak and behave positively three times as often as you do negatively, the duo found, you are in good shape to flourish and "spiral upward." In her book based on this research, *Positivity*, Fredrickson writes that "the 3-to-1 positivity ratio may well be a magical number in human psychology."

If this "magic" number seems like magical thinking to you, you may be right. A recent paper, also published in *American Psychologist*, thoroughly debunks the mathematical functions used to arrive at the now-famous 3-1 ratio—and deems the idea of a positivity tipping point "entirely unfounded."

Prompted by the critique, Fredrickson admits that the math her partner Losada employed was indeed flawed. "Science, at its best, self-corrects," she says. Instead of aiming for a specific ratio, she now says that her research does prove that "higher [positivity] is better, within bounds." She admits that while this conclusion is "less dramatic, it remains just as useful."

Now that's looking at the positive side! The strategies Fredrickson offers for improving your ratio remain as sound and timeless as ever.

**Be kind.** Or at least recognize when you are. One study conducted by Fredrickson and colleagues found that people who tracked and logged their acts of kindness for one week had higher levels of subjective well-being (SWB) at the end of the experiment than they did to begin with. What's more, being kind can be good for your health. A five-year study of 846 senior citizens found that those who offered more social support to friends, family and community—perhaps helping a neighbor with groceries or housework—lived longer than those on the receiving end of kindness and support, even when accounting for differences in health, other habits and living conditions.

**Be grateful.** But don't push it. Study participants who assessed the things for which they were thankful once a week had bigger increases in overall well-being than subjects who performed the gratitude exercise three times a week. Counting your blessings formally every day can become monotonous, Fredrickson believes.

**Go outside.** Fredrickson and her colleagues found that "for people who spent little time outdoors, weather and positivity were largely unrelated." But for the rest of us, the amount of time we spend outdoors every day does affect our moods. On not-so-sunny days, find ways to get fresh air anyway. Sit and read on a covered patio. Don all your rain gear, grab your umbrella, and go for a short walk in the rain.

**Ask questions.** Losada's previous research on high-performance business teams found that the most successful teams ask lots of questions. Instead of defending their own views, for example, they might ask colleagues to explain their ideas further. The high-performance teams "cast their attention outward as much as inward," Fredrickson says, which opens up the possible interactions between team members and creates more opportunities for synergy.

**Find the golden lining.** "Silver-lining positivity results from finding the good within the bad," says Fredrickson, but what if you took your positivity a step further and found the "gold lining" in the good? That means savoring the good moments before, during and after they happen, says Fredrickson. Instead of thinking, It won't really happen to me or I don't deserve this! or I knew it wouldn't last, recast your thoughts. Remind yourself that it's going to be fabulous when this good "event" (whether it's a professional recognition, a romance or a vacation) happens. And when it's happening, remember to drink it all in and allow yourself to really enjoy it. Afterward, feel glad you had the experience and relive all the good feelings it gave you.