

## Fresh Light on Positivity: Another cornerstone in place

Barbara Fredrickson has just published a marvellous book covering her 20 years work on building positive emotions. Many of you will have heard us talk about her research in 2005 showing a tipping point ratio of positive to negative emotions. This brilliant little book is a must read but I could not resist tempting you a little.

Barbara Fredrickson is a professor of Psychology at the University of North Carolina and has been a leading figure in the Positive Psychology movement since 2000. Her new little book called Positivity is a gem (Random House, 2009).

### 1. Positivity in Context

The Positive Psychology movement is now well established and widely promoted. Ten years ago academic psychology had nothing much to say beyond the fact that there are happy souls and sad souls. Psychology depended on the latter.

More depressing, there was a belief that the “happiness set-point” could not be changed. At the time for every study on positive emotion there were 100 studies on negative emotion. Most of psychology and psychiatry had become a bleak environment of biological intervention and containment.

In 2000, Professor Marty Seligman, already famous for his work in Learned Optimism (1995, 1998) and then President of the American Psychological Association, teamed up with some colleagues to explore this gap and build a psychology that focused on positive emotions and the life skills that might support them.

Seligman published Authentic Happiness in 2002 and Positive Psychology was unleashed. Key contributors include Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Flow), Jim Loehr (Power of Full Engagement), Christopher Peterson and Daniel Gilbert.

Behind the scenes leading academics such as Paul Ekman (Emotions Revealed), Kay Redfield Jamison (Exuberance) and Antonio Damasio (Looking for Spinoza) were defining the neurobiological mechanisms of emotion in health, performance and social effectiveness. Daniel Goleman has continued to be a powerful voice in the popular media.

The growth in Positive Psychology has been stunning. The world has been waiting for encouragement from academics that progressed the concept beyond Pollyanna optimism to a robust science with tested methodology.

### 2. Positivity in Resilience

The University of Pennsylvania’s famous Resiliency work was built on these ideas but focused largely on how to bounce back from adversity and prevent depression. They have clearly demonstrated the strong correlation between a person’s ability to generate and experience positive emotions and Resilience in this context.

Daniel Goleman and Richard Boyatzis pointed out the strong correlation between the expression of positive emotions and outstanding leadership.

We picked this idea up in our Emotional Intelligence training in 2002 and imported it into Resilience in 2003 where it has remained a cornerstone of performance mindset. In 2005 we discovered the work of Fredrickson and Macial Losada in American Psychologist.

Many of you may remember the slide showing how a ratio of more than 2.9 positive emotions to each negative emotions lead to a raft of physical, emotional, cognitive and health outcome measures.

The Science of Positive Emotion is well established now but Fredrickson’s new book puts it all together in a hugely enjoyable simple read. Most importantly it is stacked with practical guidelines.

### 3. The Positivity Ratio

The basic premise of Positivity is built on the Positivity Ratio. Back in 2003 Fredrickson met Marcial Losada, a Chilean Mathematician and Psychologist. His work was on mathematical modelling of group behaviour – particularly business teams.

He discovered a relationship between positive, other-focused and inquiring behaviours outweighed negative, self-focused and defensive behaviours. Twenty five percent of teams qualified as high performing. Their average positivity ratios were 6 to 1. Thirty percent were floundering and had ratios below 1 to 1. Mixed-performance teams averaged 2 to 1.

The mathematics showed that above 2.9013 positive to negative measures there was a tipping point where teams became high performing, flourished and built resilience.

Fredrickson has taken this idea to her research and shown that, indeed, when positive emotions outweigh negative emotions at a ratio of 3 to 1 (for simplicity) people begin to flourish.

Before going further, may I suggest that you go to [www.positivityratio.com](http://www.positivityratio.com) and take the test? This will give you your positivity ratio for today. It takes only five minutes.

### 4. What the Data Shows

Fredrickson's work shows that this ratio is indeed a stable tipping point above which humans flourish and below which we languish. Eighty percent of Americans score under 3 to 1. Ratios of 1 to 1 or less are suggestive of depression. She quotes Archives of General Psychiatry showing that 1 in 5 people are depressed (2005).

Her ongoing research has shown very clearly that we can all reduce negativity and increase positivity. At ratios of 5 and 8 to 1 she finds people are truly flourishing and following an upward spiral in physical, emotional, cognitive and social health. We would call this Resilience.

Interestingly, she proposed that at 11 to 1 the maths suggests an upper bound to flourishing. This is yet to be tested in real data.

### 5. The Benefits of Positivity

Most of us will now accept the research that generating a more optimistic, enthusiastic, appreciative and joyful life will have benefits. She quotes a meta-analysis of 300 studies, including 275,000 people, showing that Positivity produces success in life as much as it reflects success in life.

Fredrickson's work goes on to show convincingly that beyond the physical, emotional, cognitive and social benefits, Positivity works to Broaden and Build our lives. Broadening refers to the opening of the mind with increased attention, creativity and decisiveness. Building refers to the ability to craft a better life.

The benefits can be listed as a positive impact on:

1. Scope of attention
2. Broadened behavioural options
3. Intuition and creativity
4. Happiness
5. Psychological growth
6. Resilience to adversity
7. Immune function
8. Resistance to rhinovirus (cold)
9. Cortisol levels
10. Cardiovascular risk and stroke
11. Reduced pain
12. Increased longevity

### 6. Decreasing Negativity

To enjoy the benefits of Fredrickson's beautifully crafted tools to work with you must read the book but I will briefly highlight some key points.

Learn to identify and dispute negative thoughts

Stop ruminating and be present by monitoring your thoughts (awareness) and seek healthy distractions.

Become more mindful by practicing meditation, relaxation or mindfulness exercises.

Defuse your negativity landmines by identifying triggers that evoke negative thinking and feeling. She suggests three options; modify the situation, attend to a different perspective on the situation or change its meaning.

Assess and reduce your media exposure.

Find substitutes for gossip and sarcasm.

Be smarter with negative people (modify, attend differently or change meanings).

### 7. Increase Positivity

Sincerity matters. Slow down, feel your senses and emotions and be honest with where you are.

Find positive meaning by looking for the upside any challenging situation. No person or situation is ever 100% bad. There are always good qualities or learning opportunities to explore.

Savour goodness by being more mindful of situations and exploring the upside. When you reflect on the past or the future be sure to search out the positive elements in memory or anticipation. Share goodness with others.

Count your blessings is a basic Gratitude exercise made famous by Seligman.

Seek opportunities to show kindness.

Follow your passions and be playful.

Dream about your future.

Apply your strengths and find the right challenges for them thereby finding Flow.

Connect with others – a key to leadership.

Connect with nature.

Open your mind and your heart to new perspectives, ideas and people.

Many of you will recognise these ideas from our Resilience training and material. They are very well articulated in simple and practical ways. Fredrickson acknowledges the contribution of many of the authors in the new field of positive psychology.

### 8. Mindfulness

Fredrickson practices meditation and strongly advocates both the basic mindfulness of sitting meditation and the generation of loving kindness in your practice.

### 9. Building the Positive Emotions

You will have seen from the positivityratio.com site that there are 10 positive and 10 negative emotional groupings. She encourages us to build a portfolio of each of the positive groups:

1. Joy, pleasure and playfulness
2. Gratitude, thankful and appreciative
3. Serenity, peace and contentment
4. Interest, curiosity and alert
5. Hope, optimism and inventiveness
6. Pride, confidence and self assured
7. Amused, fun loving and laughter
8. Inspiration, elevation and exuberance
9. Awe, wonder and beauty
10. Love, warmth and connection

### 9. Get the Book!

