

# NURSING THAT WORKS

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POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY:  
A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH  
TO  
PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL  
FULFILLMENT

by Susanne Gaddis, PhD  
The Communications Doctor



# **NURSING THAT WORKS: POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH TO PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL FULFILLMENT**

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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

This unit is specifically designed as an educational resource for nurses.

## **UNIT DESCRIPTION:**

Do you beat yourself up for not being perfect? Do you focus more on what you can't do well rather than what you can do well? Do you take what you do best for granted? Do you feel like you are constantly dealing with your professional weakness, while ignoring your strengths?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, it's time for a "POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY" check-up.

One of the most exciting bodies of new research is positive psychology. Launched in 1999 by the then President of the American Psychological Association Dr. Martin Seligman, a University of Pennsylvania professor, it is an approach that puts as much emphasis on building people's strengths as it does on treating their weaknesses.

By applying positive psychology principles in the healthcare environment, both individual nurses and healthcare organizations will see increased motivation, productivity, enhanced employee self-esteem, as well as significantly improved self-confidence.

This unit introduces you to this dynamic and empowering psychological approach, as well as provide you with practical tips, tools and techniques that can be immediately applied to improve day-to-day interactions both at home and work.

## **AUTHOR:**

Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as The Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert, who has been teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. Gaddis' workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations are packed with tips and techniques that can be immediately applied to help improve morale, decrease staff turn-over, increase productivity and improve interpersonal communication and cooperativeness in a healthcare setting.

As a communications professor, motivational speaker, author and member of the National Speaker's Association, Susanne has appeared on nationally syndicated radio, TV and video programming and has authored articles appearing in *The Journal of Training and Development*, *The Whole American Nurse*, *The Healthcare Career Guide*, *The Handbook of Public Relations*, and on *SuccessAlways.com*.

Her clients include The Virginia Nurses Association, The New Mexico Nurses Association, The Wisconsin Nurses Association, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Bayer Corporation, UNC Hospitals, Rex Hospitals, East Texas Medical Center, NASA Space Center, SAS, Oracle, EMC, and others.

For more information on how a workshop on Positive Psychology will benefit your organization or to access additional resources on effective communication including a FREE newsletter, call 919-933-3237, or visit: <http://www.CommunicationsDoctor.com>

## **INTRODUCTION TO POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY:**

As you read this Nursing That Works Unit, something extraordinary is happening in the field of psychology that has the potential to fundamentally change for good, our nation's approach to helping people improve their performance and enhance their personal fulfillment. It's called Positive Psychology, and it's not just another feel-good, pop psychology, self-help package advertised on late-night infomercials.

Positive Psychology, the scientific study of optimal human functioning, has emerged from the social science laboratories of some of this nation's most prestigious universities like Harvard, Stanford, Penn, Michigan, UCLA and Illinois.

First introduced in 1998 by Dr. Martin Seligman, who was then president of the American Psychological Association, Positive Psychology has entered the mainstream of social science research because it holds the promise of addressing the following facts:

□ Since 1960 there has been a ten-fold increase in depression in America. What's more, depression now strikes at a much earlier age. Today the average age of an individual's first episode of depression is just over 14 years. Forty years ago it was 29 years.

- Studies have shown that lost work time due to depression costs companies a fortune with estimates ranging from \$31 billion to \$44 billion per year in lost productivity in the United States alone. And at least half of depression goes untreated.
- The proportion of American's who describe themselves as "happy" has remained a flat line over the last 50 plus years, although median real income has more than doubled.
- Gallup, the giant polling organization, recently reported that 80% of American's workforce is "disengaged" from their work.
- The Wall Street Journal reported that on average Americans are sleeping two hours less per night than their great grandparents, and are working more hours (53 hours per week).

Seligman and other positive psychologists argue that psychology has for too long focused *only* on what's wrong with people, their mental maladies, counter-productive thoughts and behaviors and negative

emotions. What they contend is that understanding the causes of the negative does not lend to insights about how to produce the positives, which the above cited data suggests.

Positive Psychology is a broadening of the scope of psychological research and practice to include creating more positive emotions in an individual's life as a means to buffer the person against everyday difficulties. Also, it proposes building your life around your natural talents and performance strengths instead of obsessively working on weaknesses. Furthermore, it contends that developing a more optimistic but realistic view of one's self and the world is more functional. The scientific research supporting this approach is overwhelming and is packed with personal and professional implications. Unfortunately, few people outside of the research community know much about Positive Psychology.

Throughout this educational unit, we would like to offer you some of the most effective and easy to apply, Positive Psychology life skills with the hope that you will find them useful in both your personal and professional life.

## So what's the first step?

To learn more about yourself, you are invited to take the VIA Signature Strengths Survey. This free self-assessment instrument is found on the Authentic Happiness Web site, located at:

<http://www.AuthenticHappiness.com>

**Note:** To access the VIA Signature Strengths Test you will be asked to register. Registration allows you to use all of the questionnaires and to keep a record of your scores on the site for future reference.

The VIA Signature Strengths Test should take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. Afterwards you will be provided with a list of your top 5 strengths. These are the unique character strengths and virtues that you possess that make you special.

There are 24 strengths measured by the VIA Signature Strengths Survey. The names and descriptions of the strengths are taken from **Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification** by Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, Oxford University Press, 2004.

These strengths include:

## **WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE**

Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge

### \* **Creativity [originality, ingenuity]**

Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it  
*Creativity, ingenuity, and originality - Thinking of new ways to do things is a crucial part of who you are. You are never content with doing something the conventional way if a better way is possible.*

### \* **Curiosity [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]**

Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering  
*Curiosity and interest in the world - You are curious about everything. You are always asking questions, and you find all subjects and topics fascinating. You like exploration and discovery.*

### \* **Open-mindedness [judgment, critical thinking]**

Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; *not* jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly  
*Judgment, critical thinking, and open-mindedness - Thinking things through and examining them from all sides are important aspects of who you are. You do not jump to conclusions, and you rely only on solid evidence to make your decisions. You are able to change your mind.*

### \* **Love of Learning**

Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of

curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add *systematically* to what one knows

*Love of learning - You love learning new things, whether in a class or on your own. You have always loved school, reading, and museums-anywhere and everywhere there is an opportunity to learn.*

\* **Perspective [wisdom]**

Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people

*Perspective (wisdom) - Although you may not think of yourself as wise, your friends hold this view of you. They value your perspective on matters and turn to you for advice. You have a way of looking at the world that makes sense to others and to yourself.*

## **COURAGE**

Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal

\* **Bravery [valor]**

Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it

*Bravery and valor - You are a courageous person who does not shrink from threat, challenge, difficulty or pain. You speak up for what is right even if there is opposition. You act on your convictions.*

\* **Persistence [perseverance, industriousness]**

Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; "getting it out the door;" taking pleasure in completing tasks

*Industry, diligence, and perseverance - You work hard to finish what you start. No matter the project, you "get it out the door" in timely fashion. You do not get distracted when you work, and you take satisfaction in completing tasks.*

\* **Integrity [authenticity, honesty]**

Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions

*Honesty, authenticity, and genuineness - You are an honest person, not only by speaking the truth but by living your life in a genuine and authentic way. You are down to earth and without pretense; you are a "real" person.*

\* **Vitality [zest, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]**

Approaching life with excitement and energy; *not* doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated

*Zest, enthusiasm, and energy - Regardless of what you do, you approach it with excitement and energy. You never do anything halfway or halfheartedly. For you, life is an adventure.*

## **HUMANITY**

Interpersonal strengths that involve "tending" and "befriending" others

\* **Love**

Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people

*Capacity to love and be loved - You value close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated. The people to whom you feel most close are the same people who feel most close to you.*

\* **Kindness [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]**

Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them

*Kindness and generosity - You are kind and generous to others, and you are never too busy to do a favor. You enjoy doing good deeds for others, even if you do not know them well.*

\* **Social Intelligence [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]**

Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit in to different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick

*Social intelligence - You are aware of the motives and feelings of other people. You know what to do to fit in to different social situations, and you know what to do to put others at ease.*

## **JUSTICE**

Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life

\* **Citizenship [social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork]**

Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share

*Citizenship, teamwork, and loyalty - You excel as a member of a group. You are a loyal and dedicated teammate, you always do your share, and you work hard for the success of your group.*

\* **Fairness**

Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; *not* letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance

*Fairness, equity, and justice - Treating all people fairly is one of your abiding principles. You do not let your personal feelings bias your decisions about other people. You give everyone a chance.*

\* **Leadership**

Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintain good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen  
*Leadership - You excel at the tasks of leadership: encouraging a group to get things done and preserving harmony within the group by making everyone feel included. You do a good job organizing activities and seeing that they happen.*

## **TEMPERANCE**

Strengths that protect against excess

\* **Forgiveness and mercy**

Forgiving those who have done wrong; giving people a second chance; *not* being vengeful

*Forgiveness and mercy - You forgive those who have done you wrong. You always give people a second chance. Your guiding principle is mercy and not revenge.*

\* **Humility/Modesty**

Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; *not* seeking the spotlight; *not* regarding one's self as more special than one is  
*Modesty and humility - You do not seek the spotlight, preferring to let your accomplishments speak for themselves. You do not regard yourself as special, and others recognize and value your modesty.*

\* **Prudence**

Being careful about one's choices; *not* taking undue risks; *not* saying or doing things that might later be regretted  
*Caution, prudence, and discretion - You are a careful person, and your choices are consistently prudent ones. You do not say or do things that you might later regret.*

\* **Self-regulation [self-control]**

Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions  
*Self-control and self-regulation - You self-consciously regulate what you feel and what you do. You are a disciplined person. You are in control of your appetites and your emotions, not vice versa.*

## **TRANSCENDENCE**

Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

\* **Appreciation of beauty and excellence [awe, wonder, elevation]**

Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience  
*Appreciation of beauty and excellence - You notice and appreciate beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience.*

\* **Gratitude**

Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen;  
taking time to express thanks

*Gratitude - You are aware of the good things that happen to you, and you never take them for granted. Your friends and family members know that you are a grateful person because you always take the time to express your thanks.*

\* **Hope [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]**

Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it;  
believing that a good future is something that can be brought about

*Hope, optimism, and future-mindedness - You expect the best in the future, and you work to achieve it. You believe that the future is something that you can control.*

\* **Humor [playfulness]**

Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes

*Humor and playfulness - You like to laugh and tease. Bringing smiles to other people is important to you. You try to see the light side of all situations.*

\* **Spirituality [religiousness, faith, purpose]**

Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort

*Spirituality, sense of purpose, and faith - You have strong and coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe. You know where you fit in the larger scheme. Your beliefs shape your actions and are a source of comfort to you.*

Although all human beings possess each of these strengths, we do so at different levels. For instance, while you may have bravery as a top strength, a colleague of yours might have prudence as their top strength.

## Why is it important to know your strengths?

There are several reasons why it's important to know your top character strengths:

1. Knowing your top strengths is good for your self-confidence and self-esteem. So many times in life we have someone who is pointing out our weaknesses while ignoring our strengths. By knowing your strengths it can give you a healthier perspective of yourself.
2. You can help others understand you better. By sharing your top character strengths with others and by having others share theirs with you, you can learn more about each other. It can give us a fresh perspective on what is important to a person.
3. Once you know your top strengths, you can work to deploy these strengths on a daily basis. Research has shown that people who find ways to use their strengths on a daily basis are happier, more content and experience more positive emotions. Daily deployment of your strengths also contributes to more positive emotions which overtime, will help you to maintain better health.
4. If you are aware of the strengths that other's possess, you can encourage them to engage in activities that will allow them to use their own strengths. For instance, if gratitude is a person's strength this might be the perfect person to write thank you notes for your department. Another example would be if a person's top strength is a love of learning, they might be the perfect person to attend a new training seminar in order to learn a new software program. They in turn can bring back this new knowledge and share it with the others in your department.

What research has shown is that once you know your strength and you actively seek to find ways to deploy your strengths, both personally and professionally, you will become more hopeful, happy and optimistic. You will experience more positive emotions and be at a lesser risk of having health problems.

**Positive Psychology Check-Up:** Now that you know your signature strengths and your strong performance capabilities, think about how often you currently use these positive traits both at work and at home?

Now, consider additional ways that you might use your signature strengths on a daily basis. Notice that there are many different opportunities to incorporate your own strengths into everyday routines.

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## **The Right Response: How to Deliver Active and Constructive Feedback**

Another positive psychology tool designed to further help you develop and strengthen your relationships, comes from Shelly Gable, assistant professor of psychology at the University of California Los Angeles. The tool is called Active-Constructive Responding.

According to Gable, the manner in which you respond when others share triumphs or good news directly builds or undermines your relationships.

Only an ACTIVE and CONSTRUCTIVE (AC) response will help us to further develop and strengthen our relationships. By giving an active and constructive response, we offer both verbal and non-verbal acknowledgment which helps someone savor the good moments in life.

## How do you respond when people share good news with you?

These two examples illustrate Gable's four response styles:

### EXAMPLE #1

**Partner A Shares Positive Event:** "I got the day off that I requested!"

#### **Partner B's Response:**

Active and Constructive – "That's great. I'm so happy for you. I know how important getting the day off was to you! You work hard and you deserve it." (Nonverbal communication: Maintaining eye contact, displaying positive emotions, smiling, nodding, laughing.)

Passive and Constructive - "That's good news." (Nonverbal communication: Little to no active emotional expression.)

Active and Destructive - "It's about time! You must have put your request in early because I just heard that Mary didn't get the day that she requested. With as hard as we all work around here, you'd think that it wouldn't be that hard to get a day off." (Nonverbal communication: Displays of negative emotions, such as shaking head, furrowed brow, frowning.)

Passive and Destructive – "Has anyone checked on patient B?" (Nonverbal communication: Little to no eye contact, turning away, leaving room.)

## **EXAMPLE #2**

**Partner A Shares Positive Event:** "Dr. Bolt seemed like he was in such a good mood today."

### **Type of Response**

Active and Constructive: "I'm happy to hear that! It's so nice when everyone is in a good mood!" (Nonverbal communication: Maintaining eye contact, displaying positive emotions, smiling, nodding, laughing.)

Passive and Constructive: "Good." (Nonverbal communication: Little to no active emotional expression.)

Active and Destructive: "Enjoy it while you can. He's been acting really weird lately anyway. I bet in no time he'll be back to his grouchy, demanding old self."

Passive and Destructive: "What time is it?" (Nonverbal communication: Little to no eye contact, turning away, leaving room.)

## **WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF ACTIVE CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONDING?**

There are many benefits of delivering an active and constructive response. Firstly, by "turning up the AC", you help people savor positive moments which generates positive feelings and reduces stress. Secondly, because people receive the positive reaction they are looking for, you significantly increase the likelihood that in the future they will share more positive things with you.

**COMMUNICATIONS CHECK-UP:** This week, monitor how often people you work with share good news with you. Next, pay attention to which category your responses fall under. Does the way that you respond to others when they share positive news encourage or discourage them? Are all of your statements ACTIVE and CONSTRUCTIVE? Or, is there room for improvement?

Also notice if your responses are different, depending on with whom you are responding. For instance, do you respond differently to hospital administrators than you do to other nurses? Do you respond differently to patients than you do your nurse manager?

Are your responses Active and Constructive? If yes, feel good about the way in which you respond to others. If you find that your responses are anything but active and constructive, find ways to “turn up the AC.”

## **PUSH UP THE POSITIVE**

One way to reduce tension and foster a culture of healthy communication at work is to “push up the positive.” To do so, make a commitment to look for examples of things that are working well in your surroundings. Then share this positive information with management. Whether you choose to deliver your positive news in verbal or written form, know that your comments are sure to be a life saver to someone who is typically drowning in a sea of negativity.

Take time to acknowledge the positive contributions of one of your colleagues or praise the entire team for working together to make it a successful shift. Do this consistently and watch for the positive response you’ll receive.

Make a choice to “push up the positive,” even if your manager is short on compliments to you and others. When doing so, you’ll become a model of good communication and make it more likely that you’ll hear more positive feedback.

Use your positive comments to promote a more positive work environment.

Example: "I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciated you getting us together this afternoon for the meeting to discuss the new computer system. The new system doesn't seem so overwhelming now and should save everyone a lot of time."

Another effective tool that will help you have a more positive outlook is called Active Disputing. Introduced in 1979 by Beck, Rush, Shaw, and Emery, Active Disputing represents a way of interrupting or stopping negative self-talk or internal dialogue. The results? A significant decrease in the amount of anxiety and depression you feel.

Just as you would argue with someone who presented you with facts outside yourself that you didn't agree with, active disputing asks you to actively dispute or argue with yourself – thereby hushing that little voice that when unchecked can lead to catastrophic thinking.

By using the ABCDE exercise as demonstrated below, you can curb your negative thinking. This can help you in almost every aspect of your life.

Active Disputing works! And once you learn it, and feel the positive results, it becomes self-reinforcing.

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## ABCDE: Your Disputation Record

Each day this next week review one event that happened that day. It can be good or bad, major or minor: The charts are unreadable, your call isn't returned, you get complimented on your attitude, etc. Remember any pessimistic thought you had about the event and now, in writing, dispute that thought

vigorously. If you cannot remember a pessimistic thought about the event, make one up. Now, dispute it vigorously.

Before you start, study the two examples below.

### **EXAMPLE #1**

**Adversity:** While making his rounds today, Dr. Morasko interrupted me while I was talking on the phone. It was obviously a professional call, and he butted right in without any consideration at all. All he's ever concerned about is getting his needs met. Well, what about mine!

**Beliefs:** The audacity of him! He should know better. Doctors just expect nurses to be at their beckoned call. You know, I have a job too, and I'm not just going to drop everything because he wants me to. I'm so sick of being taken for granted and being treated like a second-class citizen.

**Consequences/Outcomes:** I was irritated. After he left, I told everyone in the nurses station how rude it was for him to interrupt me. Even later in the day, I was still upset about it. I kept ruminating about how I could interrupt him the next time he's on the phone.

**Disputation:** That really was rude. However, I could be more understanding. After all, I was the only one around who could give him the answer. He really looked like he was in a rush. He probably had a lot of people to see. It only took a few seconds of my time, and the person on the phone seemed to understand. I felt good that I had the answer. I was able to show him that I am a professional. I was also able to demonstrate my flexibility.

**Energization:** I felt much less angry. I still was annoyed by the way he interrupted me. Even though he was being rude, I was able to focus on the fact that I could help him. It's obvious that I'm needed around here.

## **EXAMPLE #2**

**Adversity:** They've changed the computer software again. And I was just getting used to the old way of entering information.

**Beliefs:** My job is hard enough without all of these changes. I get so irritated by the way they just come in here without any warning at all and expect everyone to adjust to their every whim. I don't know who makes these decisions, but whomever it is, they don't care about me. You'd think we'd get some training on the new system. But, no!

**Consequences/Outcomes:** Every time I get near the computer I feel sick to my stomach. I'm finding myself avoiding doing any paperwork. After all, it's going to take forever! All everyone seems to be doing is moaning and groaning about it.

**Dispute:** I guess this is why they call it a job. There are going to be things that I don't like to do, but I have to. It is irritating to have a new system, but in the long run I can see how this might be more efficient. I was able to learn the last computer program quickly even though at the beginning I thought I'd have trouble. There's no sense in getting worked up about it. It's just a waste of energy. I'll just work on learning one aspect of the system at a time and I'm sure it will all come together soon.

**Energization:** I feel much better now. I still need to learn all of the new codes, but I feel confident I can handle it. Maybe I can even find ways to show a few of my colleagues what I've learned.

Now it's your turn! Every day this next week beat your pessimistic thoughts into the ground by recording the ABCDE.

Adversity:

Belief:

Consequences/Outcomes:

Disputation:

Energization:

## **POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY RESOURCES**

Beck, A. T., Rush, A. J., Shaw, B. F., & Emery, G. (1979).  
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Optimal Experience, Perennial. ISBN: 0060920432.

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Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, is the Key to High  
Performance and Personal Renewal, Free Press. ISBN:  
0743226747.

Norem, Julie (2002). The Positive Power of Negative Thinking:  
Using Defensive Pessimism to Harness Anxiety and Perform at  
Your Peak, Basic Books. ISBN: 0465051391.

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Psychology, Oxford University Press. ISBN: 0195135334.

[www.AuthenticHappiness.org](http://www.AuthenticHappiness.org)