

# A boost of positive affect: The perks of sharing positive experiences

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## Abstract

In a series of five studies we examined the relationship between sharing positive experiences and positive affect using a diary method (Study 1) and laboratory manipulations (Studies 2 and 3). All of these studies demonstrated that sharing the positive experience heightened its impact on positive affect. In Study 4, we conducted a four-week journal study in which the experimental participants kept a journal of grateful experiences and shared them with a partner twice a week. Control participants either kept a journal of grateful experience (without sharing), or kept a journal of class learnings and shared it with a partner. Those who shared their positive experiences increased in positive affect, happiness, and life satisfaction over the course of four weeks. Study 5 showed that those who received an “active-constructive” response to good news (enthusiastic support) expressed more positive affect than participants in all other conditions, indicating that the response of the listener is important. In sum, our findings suggest that positive affect, happiness, and life satisfaction reach a peak only when participants share their positive experiences and when the relationship partner provides an active-constructive response.

## Keywords

capitalization, friendship, positive affect

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Happiness held is the seed; happiness shared is the flower. Author unknown

Although negative emotional experiences are often dramatic and impactful (and have captured the lion's share of researcher interest), positive emotions are considerably more prevalent. In a given day, people have about three positive experiences to each negative experience (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Seeking out others when good things happen has been referred to as capitalization (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004; Langston, 1994). In other words, capitalizing is sharing positive news in your life with others. Sharing positive experiences is common: people disclose their most positive daily experience 60–80% of the time (Gable et al., 2004). The primary objective of the current studies was to demonstrate a causal relationship that sharing one's positive experience would have with positive mood, above and beyond the possible effects of reliving the experience or having a pleasant interaction, which builds on prior correlational research.

It could be that happy people simply share more positive experiences and that there is no causal link between sharing positive experiences and positive affect. Prior research (e.g., Gable et al., 2004; Langston, 1994) has shown some correlation between sharing positive experiences and positive mood; however, most prior research has been somewhat limited to correlational methods. The primary exception (Reis et al., 2010) focused on how sharing positive experiences may build trust and prosocial orientation towards the listener with whom one shares. Thus, one primary objective of the current studies is to demonstrate a causal relationship between sharing and positive mood.

The current studies had three other objectives. It may be that simply reliving or savoring the positive experience is enough to increase positive affect. If this were the case, then simply writing about an experience should yield an increase in positive affect, but the research on this topic is mixed. For instance, Koo, Algoe, Wilson, and Gilbert (2008) found that thinking about positive events that might never have been, had a stronger effect on positive affect than was thinking about the presence of a positive event. In contrast, several studies indicate that writing about a positive experience yields improvement in mood. For instance, gratitude journals have also garnered attention from researchers, and participants who kept a daily gratitude journal improved in mood and coping behaviors (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Another study found that participants who wrote about intense positive emotions showed enhanced positive mood, as compared to those who wrote on a control topic (Burton & King, 2004). Thus, writing about positive experiences has been linked to boosts in positive affect. Therefore, a second objective of the current studies is to rule out the possibility that any boosts in mood following the sharing of a positive experience are simply due to reliving the experience by writing and thinking about it. We predict that sharing a positive experience will uniquely contribute to positive affect.

Thirdly, it could just be that simply having a pleasant interaction with a partner is what is responsible for an increase in positive mood. Prior research (e.g., Vittengl & Holt, 1998) suggests that positive forms of social interaction, specifically fun/active and necessary/informational, are related to elevated positive affect. Thus, another goal of the present investigation is to rule out the possibility that simply having a pleasant interaction with a close relationship partner provides the boost in positive affect.

The final objective is to examine how the role of partner response to an event affects the degree of positive emotion experienced by the participant. Some prior research

indicates that the partner's response is very important. In fact, responses to positive events tend to be better predictors of relationship well-being than responses to negative events (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006) and an enthusiastic, supportive response has been positively correlated with commitment, satisfaction, intimacy, and trust (Gable et al., 2004). Lyubomirsky, Sousa, and Dickerhoof (2006) contrasted the benefits of writing, talking, and thinking about positive events. They found that those who talked about their positive experiences reported lower life satisfaction compared to those who wrote or thought about the experience. Hence the implication was that talking is relatively ineffective, if not detrimental. However, participants in this study talked into a tape recorder and received no in-person affirmation about their positive experience from a live person. We reasoned that sharing with a relationship partner is qualitatively different from speaking into a tape recorder because it elicits help, validation, and support from a trusted other in completing a second appraisal of the experience. Having the positivity of one's experience validated by another person is what makes sharing an experience different from other means of revisiting, such as writing about the experience. We suspect that the reaction of the listener will be paramount in that it will affect the amount of positive emotion experienced by the sharer following a positive event.

## **Overview of Studies**

In a series of five studies, we sought to test whether sharing of a positive experience with a relationship partner and the reaction of the listener might increase positive emotion. Study 1 sought to replicate the primary effect of prior research that sharing positive experiences positively corresponds with positive emotion. Studies 2 and 3 examined whether sharing positive experiences was related causally to enhanced positive affect and life satisfaction in a laboratory setting. These studies also were designed to rule out the alternative explanation that simply reliving the experience through writing about it (Studies 2 and 3) would boost positive affect or that having a pleasant interaction with a close relationship partner would account for changes in affect (Study 3).

In Study 4 we wanted to test whether regular sharing of positive experiences would lead to gains in happiness and positive affect over the course of four weeks, using a journaling technique. Participants either shared grateful experiences, wrote about grateful experiences, or shared neutral experiences with a partner and wrote about their experience in an online journal twice a week for four weeks. We hypothesized that those who shared their grateful experiences would report the strongest increases in happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect.

Lastly, in Study 5 we examined how the response of one's relationship partner to a positive event may impact one's experience of positive emotion following the event and hypothesized that only an active-constructive response would boost positive emotion.

## **Study 1**

The primary objective of Study 1 was to replicate prior studies (e.g., Gable et al., 2004) by testing the relationship between sharing positive experiences and positive affect using both pre and post-test scores and diary data. We hypothesized that participants who had a

higher tendency to share positive experiences at Time 1 would have more positive affect and satisfaction with life at Time 2, after controlling for initial positive affect and satisfaction with life. Furthermore, using multilevel modeling, we analyzed the journal reports (based on assessments administered three times a week) and hypothesized that participants would report greater positive affect and satisfaction with life on days when they shared their positive experiences.

## *Method*

*Participants.* Participants were 260 undergraduate students from a Southeastern university who agreed to participate in exchange for extra credit. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 41 with a median age of 19 and reported about sharing positive experiences with either a romantic partner or close friend. This person is referred to as “partner.” Participants completed pretest measures and within two days began the journaling measures for a period of four weeks, followed immediately by the post-test measures.

## *Pre and post measures*

*Sharing positive experiences.* We used a four-item measure that assessed the degree to which participants shared positive experiences with others (Lambert, Gwinn, Fincham, & Stillman, 2012). Example questions included, “I am the type of person that loves to share it with others when something good happens to me,” “I almost always let the people that I’m close to know when I feel good and why,” “I usually keep good feelings bottled up and don’t share them very often,” and “I’m constantly telling people my good news.” Choices ranged from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” The alpha for the current sample was .89.

*Positive and Negative Affect Scales.* Positive affect was measured using the 10 items from the Positive dimension of the Positive and Negative Affect Scales (PANAS), a widely used measure of positive and negative affect (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The alphas for the current sample were .92 for Time 1 and .94 at Time 2.

*Satisfaction with Life.* Satisfaction with life was measured using the well-validated Satisfaction with Life scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). This measure comprises five items (e.g., “In most ways my life is close to ideal,” “If I could live my life over again, I would change nothing.”). Coefficient alphas in the present sample were .88 at Time 1 and .86 at Time 2.

## *Journaling Measures*

To assess the degree to which participants shared their good experiences with a close relationship partner, we asked participants to denote their agreement to the following questions three times each week: “I shared my positive feelings (e.g., about something good that happened to me) with my partner since the last time I completed the log” and “I shared my positive feelings (e.g., about something good that happened to me) with someone other than (or in addition to) my partner since the last log.” Participants

completed this online log every Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday evening and late responses were not admitted. Participants also completed the PANAS (Watson et al., 1988) three times each week (alphas  $\alpha > .70$ ). To assess their life satisfaction, participants answered the question, "How satisfied were you with your life overall since the last log?"

## Results

### Attrition

Fifty-six participants failed to complete measures at Time 2. To ensure that attrition did not affect the results of our study, we compared Time 1 scores of all variables of participants who dropped out with those who remained in the study. There were no differences between the groups with any of the variables ( $F$  values  $< 4$ ,  $p$  values  $> .05$ ).

### Sharing positive experiences and positive emotion: Pre and post-test results

We used hierarchical regression analysis to determine whether initial sharing of positive news would predict participants' later positive affect when controlling for their initial positive affect scores. In the first step, we entered the control variable of initial positive affect. In the second step, we entered, baseline positive experience sharing scores. As predicted, greater tendency toward sharing of positive experiences at Time 1 was associated with greater positive affect scores four weeks later, controlling for initial positive affect ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $p = .01$ ). Furthermore, greater tendency toward sharing of positive experiences at Time 1 was marginally related to higher levels of life satisfaction at Time 2, controlling for initial life satisfaction ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $p = .08$ ).

### Diary results

We tested the main effect of time, sharing with partner and others, and the interaction between time and sharing with partner and others in a multilevel model. Stata 11 software was used in running the model. Both sharing with partner and sharing with others was grand mean centered, and time was centered at the first occasion. Overall, we had 260 participants with 1893 observations with an average of 7.3 out of 9 data points for the life satisfaction model and 260 participants with 1902 observations with an average of 7.3 out of 9 data points for the positive affect model. The model used for both life satisfaction and positive affect was a two-level random-intercept model.

Level 1:

$$y_{ij} = \pi_{0j} + \pi_{1j}(\text{Time}) + \pi_{2j}(\text{Shared Partner}) + \pi_{3j}(\text{Shared Other}) \\ + \pi_{4j}(\text{Shared Partner} \times \text{Time}) + \pi_{5j}(\text{Shared Other} \times \text{Time}) + e_{ij}$$

Level 2:

$$\pi_{0j} = \beta_{01} + r_{0j}$$

$$\pi_{1j} = \beta_{11} + r_{1j}$$

**Table 1.** Results of random-intercept growth models

Predictor	Life satisfaction			Positive affect		
	B	z	ES	B	z	ES
Sharing with partner	0.130	2.91**	0.128	0.095	2.80**	0.159
Sharing with others	0.189	4.23***	0.186	0.152	4.44***	0.254
Constant	4.943	73.21***	5			
Random effects	Variance	S.E.		Variance	S.E.	
Slope	0.003	0.002		0.005	0.001	
Intercept	0.704	0.083		0.258	0.036	
Residual	1.019	0.038		0.599	0.022	

Note. \*\* $p \leq .01$  and \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

$$\pi_{2j} = \beta_{21}$$

$$\pi_{3j} = \beta_{31}$$

$$\pi_{4j} = \beta_{41}$$

$$\pi_{5j} = \beta_{51}$$

The model was significant for both life satisfaction (Wald  $\chi^2(5) = 143.90, p < 0.001$ ) and positive affect (Wald  $\chi^2(5) = 107.85, p < 0.001$ ) and both had large intraclass correlations: 0.45 for life satisfaction and 0.37 for positive affect. The variance at the individual level, as reported in Table 1, is substantial for both and the likelihood ratio  $\chi^2$  for the multilevel model versus an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with 1 degree of freedom was 509.66,  $p < .001$  for life satisfaction and 406.30,  $p < .001$  for positive affect. The combination of these facts supports the use of a multilevel model.

The main effect of sharing with partner was significant for both life satisfaction ( $B_3 = 0.132, p < 0.01$ ) and positive affect ( $B_3 = 0.101, p < 0.01$ ), as was the main effect of sharing with others (life satisfaction:  $B_4 = 0.177, p < 0.001$ ; positive affect:  $B_4 = 0.148, p < 0.001$ ). There were no interactions between time and the sharing variables, indicating some stability of the variables over time for this population over this period of time (see Table 1 for full results). Also included in the table are the effect sizes for the parameters using the residual variance as the denominator (Feingold, 2009).

## Discussion

Both the pre-post data and the diary data indicated that the tendency to share positive experiences and the sharing of positive experiences were positively related to changes in positive affect and life satisfaction over time. These data indicate that the general tendency to share positive experiences predicts positive emotion indicators over time, and also indicate that on the days when participants shared a positive experience, they also reported higher positive affect and life satisfaction. These findings replicated a similar

effect found by Gable and colleagues (2004) on how sharing a favorable event positively corresponds to positive affect and satisfaction with life.

Clear causal conclusions cannot, however, be drawn either from these findings or from similar prior work because of the correlational design. In principle, sharing positive experiences could have brought positive emotion, but it is also possible that pleasant experiences themselves caused both the sharing and the positive emotion. It is also possible that happy people are more prone than others to share. Hence these data constitute only a first step. The following studies used experimental designs in order to ascertain whether sharing positive experiences specifically causes positive emotion.

## **Study 2**

The objective of Study 2 was to experimentally test the relationship between sharing positive experiences and positive affect. Our hypothesis was that the participants who shared their positive event would have more positive affect as opposed to those who simply thought and wrote about the same type of experience.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

In an introductory course on families and the lifespan, 96 participants (69 women) participated in exchange for extra credit. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 24 with a median age of 19. Participants came to the lab with either a romantic partner or with a close friend. The study results were not moderated by relationship status.

## **Measures**

### *Positive and Negative Affect Scale*

We again used the Positive affect items from the PANAS (Watson et al., 1988). The alpha for the current sample was .91.

### *Positivity of the recalled event*

To ensure that the positivity of the recalled event was not driving the findings, we included two items that were averaged together: "How positive was the event?" and "How memorable was this?". The items correlated at  $r = .67$ . These items were then controlled for in the analysis.

## **Procedure**

All participants were instructed to "Think of something good that happened to you in the past two weeks. Please write a paragraph describing what happened in the space below." They were then assigned randomly to either a no treatment condition or a sharing experience condition. Those in the sharing condition were taken into a separate room and were asked to recall the positive thing that they wrote about in the survey and to share it

with their partner. Specifically, the participants were instructed to “Begin by taking about two minutes to share with your partner what happened and how you felt. Once you have had a chance to share, please ring the bell.” Control participants skipped the sharing step but engaged in the writing task in a separate room from their partner, just as the experimental participants did. All participants then rated their mood and were debriefed and dismissed.

## Results

Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) confirmed that participants in the sharing positive experiences condition reported higher positive affect scores ( $M = 32.70$ ,  $SD = 7.55$ ) than those in the positive experience writing condition ( $M = 30.13$ ,  $SD = 9.39$ ,  $F(1, 91) = 4.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .02$ ), after controlling for the positivity of the event and gender.

## Discussion

Consistent with our hypotheses, sharing a positive experience caused an increase in positive emotion, relative to a control group who also recalled the positive experience but did not share it with someone. The study demonstrates that sharing positive news caused more positive emotion than simply thinking about the positive news. However, one limitation of this study was that more time was spent focusing on a positive event and this, rather than the sharing, may be responsible for the observed effect. Furthermore, without pretest of positive affect, it is difficult to know whether participants in the sharing condition were happier to begin with. This limitation is addressed in Study 4. Also, it could be that simply interacting with someone else, rather than the sharing per se, may be driving the effect. Study 3 addresses the latter concern.

## Study 3

Study 2 showed that sharing positive experiences caused more positive emotion than merely thinking about the positive experiences. Study 3 undertook to differentiate whether benefits came from social interaction per se or specifically from sharing one’s memory of a positive experience. Therefore, Study 3 compared the effects of telling a positive experience to someone with a different kind of neutral interaction, namely talking to a partner about something the participant learned in class.

## Method

*Participants.* In an introductory course on families and the lifespan, 184 participants (131 women) completed the survey for extra credit. Participants attended the lab session with either a romantic partner or with a close friend. Relationship status did not moderate the results.

### *Measures completed following the manipulation*

*Happiness.* We measured happiness with a single item, “I consider myself:” on a scale from “Not a very happy person” to “A very happy person.”



**Irritability.** Given that this interaction occurred at the end of a long session of data collection (including measures unrelated to the current study), we controlled for irritability to ensure that it was not driving the results. We measured irritability with the single item, “Describe the extent you feel irritable” on a scale from “Very Slightly or Not at All” to “Extremely.” The mean level of irritability was 1.81, with a standard deviation of .97.

**Procedure.** Participants were again asked to “Please think of something good that happened to you in the past two weeks. Please write a paragraph describing what happened.” They were then assigned randomly to either a sharing positive experience condition or to a neutral interaction condition.

**Sharing of positive experience condition.** As before, these participants were taken into a separate room and were asked to recall the positive thing they wrote about in the survey and share it with their partner. Specifically, the class participant was instructed to “Begin by taking about two minutes to share with your partner what happened and how you felt. Once you have had a chance to share, please ring the bell.”

**Neutral interaction control condition.** To ensure that the results were not driven by simply having an interaction with their partner, we included a neutral sharing condition. Those in this neutral sharing control condition were given the following instructions: “Take about two minutes to share with your partner something you learned in class this week, then please ring the bell.”

## Results

One-way ANCOVA revealed that participants in the sharing positive experiences condition reported higher levels of happiness ( $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) than those in the neutral interaction condition ( $M = 5.46$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ,  $F(1, 180) = 3.95$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ) when controlling for feelings of irritation, gender, and age.

## Discussion

Study 3 provided further evidence that sharing good experiences causes positive emotion, even though the effect size was small. Nonetheless, people felt better when the interaction involved telling the partner about the pleasant experience than when it involved discussing something learned in class. Thus, the emotional benefits of sharing a pleasant personal experience are above and beyond the benefits of recalling the experience and of interacting pleasantly with someone.

## Study 4

The objective of the current study was to address some of the limitations of the prior studies and to determine whether sharing grateful experiences multiple times would create an accumulation of feelings of well-being and vitality above and beyond the effect of simply writing and thinking about grateful experiences or having neutral interactions

with a partner. We selected grateful experiences as the focus of sharing in order to exert a greater level of experimental control and to diminish the variability in what types of experiences were shared. We proposed that the participants who share grateful events will have higher levels of well-being and vitality than those in control conditions.

## Method

**Participants.** Initially, 158 participants in an introductory course on families and the lifespan began the study for extra credit. Of them, 137 participants (117 women) completed a daily task in which they wrote about grateful experiences and then shared them with their partner twice a week. Participants also completed dependent variables in the lab at both time points. Participants (age range, 17–31; median age = 20) reported about either a relationship with a romantic partner or with a close friend. There were no significant differences in the dependent variables based on relationship status, so they were combined for all analyses.

## Measures

**Happiness.** Happiness was assessed with the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS, Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999;  $\alpha = .85$ ). Participants reported how happy they were on four items, such that “1” represents not being a very happy person and “7” indicates being a very happy person. Coefficient alphas were .89 at Time 1 and .91 at Time 2.

**Satisfaction with Life.** Satisfaction with Life was measured using the well-validated Satisfaction with Life scale (Diener et al., 1985). This measure comprises five items (e.g., “In most ways my life is close to ideal,” “If I could live my life over again, I would change nothing.”). Coefficient alphas were .86 at Time 1 and .89 at Time 2.

**Positive Affect Scale.** Positive affect was measured using the Positive dimension of the PANAS, a widely used measure of positive and negative affect (Watson et al., 1988). The alphas were .87 at Time 1 and .88 at Time 2.

**Vitality.** We used Ryan and Frederick’s (1997) seven-item scale to measure vitality. Sample items include “I feel alive and vital,” “I look forward to each new day,” and “I feel energized”. Items were rated using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = “Strongly disagree” and 7 = “Strongly agree”). Coefficient alphas were .90 at Time 1 and .89 at Time 2.

**Procedure.** All participants completed measures at Time 1, were then assigned randomly to a condition and completed a four-week daily journal assignment, and then completed follow-up measures at Time 2. The three conditions were as follows.

**Sharing grateful experience condition.** These participants were instructed to keep a grateful experiences journal for four weeks. Each evening they were to spend five minutes thinking and writing about what they were grateful for and why. Twice a week they completed a survey and entered what they had written into an online source. For instance, participants could write about their gratitude for a particular opportunity they had experienced in their life. Furthermore, they were instructed “Sometime during the

next three days you will also need to share your grateful experience with the person you brought with you to the first lab session. The point is to SHARE the grateful experience you have been writing about with this person at least twice a week.”

*Grateful experience thought condition.* To ensure that there was something unique about sharing grateful experiences, rather than simply thinking about them, we included this grateful experience thought control. The participants in this control condition kept the daily grateful experiences journal just as the prior, experimental condition; however, this group was not required to share their grateful experiences.

*Neutral interaction condition.* To ensure that any increase in positive affect was not simply due to having regular interaction with one's partner, those assigned to this condition were instructed to keep a daily journal of the things they were learning in their classes and to share this with their partner twice a week.

## Results

*Attrition.* Twenty-one participants who completed all measures at Time 1 had dropped out by Time 2. All but three of the participants who failed to complete Time 2 measures dropped out right after completing the baseline measures, indicating that trouble in completing their assigned activity was not likely the reason for dropping out of the study. However, to ensure that any differential attrition by condition did not bias results, we compared those who dropped out by condition on all dependent variables. There were no significant differences by condition on Time 1 positive affect ( $F(2, 155) = .69, p > .05$ ), happiness ( $F(2, 155) = .05, p > .05$ ), life satisfaction ( $F(2, 155) = .72, p > .05$ ), or T1 vitality ( $F(2, 155) = .97, p > .05$ ). Nor were there any differences between those who persisted and those who dropped out of the study on Time 1 positive affect levels ( $F(1, 152) = .14, p > .05$ ), Time 1 happiness ( $F(2, 153) = 1.53, p > .05$ ), Time 1 life satisfaction ( $F(2, 133) = 3.01, p > .05$ ), or T1 vitality ( $F(1, 251) = .49, p > .05$ ). Thus, attrition does not appear to be an alternative explanation for our findings.

### *Effect of sharing grateful experiences*

*Positive affect.* Positive affect was analyzed using ANCOVA in which Time 1 positive affect and gender served as covariates. This analysis revealed a marginally significant main effect for condition ( $F(2, 120) = 2.58, p = .08$ ). Planned comparisons revealed that those in the share condition reported higher positive affect ( $M = 29.30, SD = 8.68$ ) than both those in the positive thought condition ( $M = 25.86, SD = 9.35, F(1, 126) = 3.54, p = .06, d = .38$ ) and the neutral interaction condition ( $M = 25.65, SD = 10.22, F(1, 126) = 4.24, p < .04, d = .38$ ), controlling for Time 1 positive affect and gender. No other contrasts were statistically significant.

*Happiness.* ANCOVA revealed a significant main effect by condition ( $F(2, 124) = 3.94, p < .05$ ). Planned comparisons revealed higher levels of happiness among those in the share condition ( $M = 5.78, SD = 1.10$ ) than among those in both the positive thought condition ( $M = 5.45, SD = 1.07, F(1, 124) = 4.14, p < .05, d = .30$ ) and the neutral interaction condition ( $M = 5.36, SD = 1.29, F(1, 124) = 7.30, p < .01, d = .35$ ),

controlling for Time 1 happiness and gender. No other contrasts were statistically significant.

**Life satisfaction.** Results revealed a significant main effect by condition ( $F(2, 125) = 3.01$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Planned comparisons revealed higher levels of life satisfaction among those in the share condition ( $M = 5.30$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) than among those in the grateful thought condition ( $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ,  $F(1, 125) = 4.75$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $d = .38$ ) and the neutral interaction condition ( $M = 4.68$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ,  $F(1, 125) = 5.65$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = .48$ ), controlling Time 1 life satisfaction and gender. No other contrasts were statistically significant.

**Vitality.** Results revealed a significant main effect by condition ( $F(2, 124) = 7.39$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Planned comparisons revealed higher levels of vitality among those in the share condition ( $M = 5.17$ ,  $SD = .99$ ) than among those in the neutral interaction condition ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ,  $F(1, 124) = 14.66$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = .67$ ) and the grateful experience thought condition ( $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ,  $F(1, 124) = 5.36$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = .44$ ). No other contrasts were statistically significant.

## Discussion

Consistent with our hypothesis, participants who had shared their grateful experiences with a partner reported significantly more satisfaction with life, more happiness, and more vitality than participants in either control condition. This indicates that there are salutary benefits unique to sharing one's grateful experiences with another person as opposed to simply writing them or having a neutral interaction.

Two aspects of the current study advance the literature. Firstly, the benefits of telling others about one's grateful experiences extend beyond the transient emotional pleasure that accompanies the telling. The current study showed that these benefits extended to existential implications, such as finding life more satisfying. Secondly, the results appeared to endure and possibly accumulate. For some participants, 2–3 days may have elapsed from the final sharing until the time they completed follow-up measures, indicating that the effects of the sharing on happiness and life satisfaction were not fleeting. Furthermore, the participants in the control conditions were not specifically instructed to refrain from sharing their grateful experiences with their relationship partners. As a result, they may have naturally shared grateful experiences with their partner during this time period, making the significant effects found all that much more difficult to obtain and therefore more noteworthy.

## Study 5

To this point we have exclusively examined the effect of sharing positive experiences with a relationship partner without taking into account the response of the relationship partner. Individuals may turn to others to validate the positivity of their good news and the reaction of this relationship partner should be influential in the amount of positive emotion the individual experiences in reaction to his/her positive event. The objective of the current study is to examine how the reaction of a relationship partner will affect the experience of positive emotion. Past research indicates that enthusiastic support is the

most effective response to hearing about the good news of someone else and has been called an “active-constructive” response. This type of response has been found to be positively correlated with intimacy, commitment, satisfaction, and trust (Gable, et al., 2004). Less effective responses include quashing the event “active-destructive,” ignoring the event “passive-destructive” or giving understated, minimal support “passive-constructive.” These responses have been related to undesirable relationship outcomes (Gable et al., 2004). Conversely active-destructive (“quashing the event”) and passive-destructive (“ignoring the event”) responses and also passive-constructive (“quiet, understated support”) responses have been related to negative relationship outcomes. We predict that active-constructive responses by the relationship partner will have a stronger effect on the amount of positive emotion experienced following a positive event than all the other types of responses.

## Method

**Participants.** One hundred and six student participants (56 female) completed the study in exchange for US \$30. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25, with the median age of 21; they attended the lab session with their romantic partner.

**Procedure.** Participants were told that the study was investigating how people perform on tasks in the presence or absence of their partner. They had been assigned to the alone condition but could email each other during the tasks (to simulate real-life interactions). The couples were then separated into different rooms and completed a packet of questionnaires unrelated to the current study. Both members of the couple then completed a mental skills task called “Desert Survival.” They had to rank the importance of 15 items to survival in the desert. They were told that the correct answers, and therefore their own scores, were based on expert opinions. This score would then be compared to an average non-expert person’s score to give a percentile ranking of the participant’s success. To minimize any direct competition, it was emphasized that their partner would be doing a different task (i.e., they did not realize that everyone performed the same Desert Survival task).

When the task was complete, the experimenter took their responses and left to “calculate the results.” Upon returning the experimenter said, “Congratulations! You did extremely well on your test! You got in the top 10%! Hardly anyone gets that high of a score. I was so impressed when I saw the results that I told your partner how well you did. I hope you don’t mind.”

The participant was then shown the lab email program and told: “I saw your boyfriend/girlfriend email you something when I told him/her your score, so it might be here already.” Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of the following four emails ostensibly from their partner and were left alone to read the email and respond if they wished. These emails were extensively pilot tested for style, punctuation, etc. to increase the likelihood they would be perceived as authentic by participants.

*Active constructive (N = 30):* Great job!!!! i heard you got in the top 10% i’m so proud of you. the girl told me your task is a good measure of (logic skills?) and it sounds like its pretty

hard to do as well as you did bet you'll do just as well on your next one!!!

*Active destructive* ( $N = 25$ ): i heard you got in the top 10%. the girl told me about your task but it doesn't sound that hard to me. i wonder how I did

*Passive constructive* ( $N = 25$ ): the girl told me your score. =)

*Passive destructive* ( $N = 26$ ): the girl told me your score.

Participants were left alone with this email program and were given time to respond. The primary dependent variable for this study is the reaction expressed in these email responses. The experimenter returned five minutes later, gave participants some additional questionnaires unrelated to this study, probed for suspicion, and then reunited, debriefed, and paid the couples.

### Measures

*Coding of emails.* Because research shows that felt emotion is expressed in writing (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003), the participant's email responses to their partner were coded for instances of the positive feelings of love (e.g., "love you."), appreciation (e.g., "Thanks babycakes"), and happiness (e.g., "Booyow!! Guess i'm a good person to be stranded with, huh?? Good luck over there Chipmunk"). Two independent coders blind to the participant's condition coded each email. Where disagreements between coders were noted, a third independent coder would rate the statement. These disagreements often stemmed from a couple's internal jargon and how to objectively determine the meaning behind them. For example, one member of a couple replied as follows: "Yeah, I am so smart, ###-R-T, I mean ###-A-R-T." Coding items were created with simplicity in order to emphasize their face validity (e.g., "Did they feel appreciation for their partner's response?" using a yes/no scale). Weighted kappa coefficients (Cohen, 1968) were used to determine inter-rater reliability for the three positive emotions, including love ( $\kappa_w = .49$ ), appreciation ( $\kappa_w = .33$ ), and happiness ( $\kappa_w = .47$ ). The positive emotion scores were combined to create a "positive emotions" composite with a reliability  $\alpha = .74$

### Results and discussion

During the joint debriefing at the end of the study, at least one member of 13 couples expressed suspicion; these couples were removed from the sample, leaving 42 couples ( $n = 84$ ) in the analysis (please note that in two instances, both members of the couple expressed suspicion). Five participants did not send email responses; however, these same five participants were excluded for expressing suspicion during the debriefing. The number of suspicious couples did not significantly differ across experimental condition and the remaining sample sizes were as follows across condition: active-constructive = 22, active-deconstructive = 20, passive-constructive = 20, passive-deconstructive = 22. Seventeen participants in the active-constructive condition, three in the active-destructive condition, nine in the passive-constructive condition, and thirteen in the

passive-destructive condition expressed a positive email response. Because previous work has found that active-constructive responses (as opposed to the other types of responses) from a partner related to higher well-being and higher relationship satisfaction (e.g., Gable et al., 2004), the analyses focused on comparisons between the active-constructive condition versus all other conditions. The data provided by partners violated the assumption of independence. The data set was hierarchically nested, with persons nested within couples. Multilevel modeling in the HLM computer program was used to examine the hypothesis that an active-constructive response would be associated with expressions of more positive emotion. To test this hypothesis, we entered active-constructive response (versus the other three responses) as a Level 1 predictor of positive emotions. The Level 1 equation predicts the individual's presence of being in the active-constructive condition for a given couple. The significance test in HLM used robust standard errors. Below is the HLM equation used for this analysis:

Level 1 model

$$\text{Positive Emotions} = P0 + P1*(ACTCON) + E$$

Level 2 model

$$P0 = B00 + R0$$

$$P1 = B10$$

We found that participants in the active-constructive condition expressed more positive emotions as compared to the other three conditions (unstandardized HLM coefficient = 1.27,  $t(77) = 5.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ). For this model,  $\tau^2$  is .05 and  $\sigma^2$  is .94. Thus, when given active and constructive feedback, participants responded with more love, appreciation, and happiness. Perceiving partner responsiveness caused an increase in their experience of positive emotions, as rated by coders that were blind to the study hypotheses. This final study demonstrates that how the relationship partner responds to the shared experience of the participant plays an important role in the positive emotion experienced. In fact, the results of the current study indicate that for those whose partners did not provide an active-constructive response, the positive emotion experienced was less than half as large as the positive emotion of the participants whose partners did respond with enthusiastic support. Thus, response of the relationship partner matters.

## **General Discussion**

In a series of five studies we sought to test how sharing a positive experience with a relationship partner might increase an individual's happiness and positive affect. In Study 1, we found that people's tendency to share their positive experiences with someone else at Time 1 predicted their later positive affect and life satisfaction, after controlling for baseline levels of affect and life satisfaction. Furthermore, Study 1's diary data showed that positive affect and life satisfaction were higher on days during which they told a partner about a positive experience than on other days. In Study 2, all participants were instructed to write about something good that happened to them in the past two weeks and to share or not share. Those participants who shared their positive event reported higher positive affect than those who simply wrote about their positive event.

Study 3 was designed to rule out the alternative explanation that the congenial interaction with a partner, rather than specifically sharing the positive experiences, was what provided a lift in mood. This time we again instructed all participants to write about something good that happened to them in the past two weeks and then we randomly assigned participants to either share their positive event with their relationship partner or to discuss something that they had recently learned with their relationship partner, after which they reported their happiness level. Participants who shared their positive event with a partner reported themselves as being happier than did control participants.

In Study 4 we wanted to test whether regular sharing of positive experiences would lead to gains in happiness, positive affect, and life satisfaction over the course of four weeks, using a journaling technique. Participants completed baseline measures of vitality, satisfaction with life, happiness, and positive affect, and were then assigned to one of two conditions: a gratitude sharing condition or a sharing of learning. Participants in the grateful experiences sharing condition were instructed to write about some of their grateful experiences and then share them with a partner at least twice a week and write about their experience in an online journal twice a week for four weeks.

To ensure that any post-test differences were not due simply to thinking about positive experiences, one set of control participants were assigned to write on these same gratitude topics twice a week for four weeks, but were not required to share their thoughts or experiences with a relationship partner. In addition, to ensure that simply having a regular, positive interaction with a relationship partner was not driving the proposed study effects, another set of control participants were instructed to write about things that they were learning in a class, share this knowledge with a partner twice a week, and report about it in an online journal twice a week for four weeks.

Upon the conclusion of the four weeks, all participants completed follow-up measures of satisfaction with life, happiness, and positive affect. Consistent with study hypotheses, participants who had shared their positive gratitude experiences with a partner reported significantly more satisfaction with life, happiness, and positive affect than participants in either control condition. This consistent pattern of results across five studies indicates that there is something unique about not just dwelling on, but sharing with another person one's positive experiences on positive emotion, including happiness, positive affect, life satisfaction, and vitality.

Thus, Studies 1–4 accomplished our first three objectives by demonstrating that (1) a causal relationship exists between sharing positive experiences and positive mood, (2) boosts in mood are not due to simply savoring the experience by thinking and writing about them, and (3) nor are such increases due to merely having a positive interaction with a partner.

Lastly, Study 5 examined how the response of the relationship partner would impact the positive emotion experienced by the participant. We manipulated the ostensible response of the relationship partner and found that participants randomly assigned to receive an active-constructive response experienced far greater positive emotion than control participants. This finding accomplished our final objective, which was to demonstrate that the reaction of the relationship partner acts as an amplifier of the experience. Thus, sharing alone is not enough to fully experience a boost of positive emotion. Instead, for a boost to positive emotion to be fully experienced the relationship partner must provide an active-constructive response.



### ***Reasons why sharing and receiving an enthusiastic response may enhance positive emotion***

There are several potential reasons for why sharing a positive experience should boost positive emotion that should be tested by future research. If positive events are more easily accessible in the memory, they may plausibly be able to continue to have influence on later positive affect and coping. The event itself creates one memory trace, but each time one discusses it with another person, another memory trace is created, and so the more often one discusses it with others, the more accessible the original event may become in memory. It may also gain further associative ties as the person records other people's knowledge about it and it gets embellished by their reactions.

In Study 4, having greater access to a cognitive storehouse of such events likely impacted participants' self-report of vitality, positive affect, happiness, and life satisfaction, inasmuch as individuals reflect on recent past experiences to discern their current affective state. It seems likely that having a better short-term recollection of shared positive experiences would have an effect on self-reported positive emotion. Otherwise stated, people drew on a reservoir of positive events readily accessible to memory when they were asked about their current affective state. However, writing may also be instrumental in increasing the cognitive accessibility of the event in one's memory. Thus, why is sharing the experience with someone else unique from writing (as we found)?

We suggest that there will be pleasure based on entering the experience into the shared history with the listener. In an important sense, telling the partner about the event may increase the event's social reality (e.g., Gollwitzer, 1986) in the sense that events and their implications gain validation when members of a group agree on them (as compared to being held privately in memory). Prior work has found that sharing a positive event is correlated with heightened memory of that particular event (Gable et al., 2004), and we suggest this is likely due in part to the enhanced social reality of sharing it with someone else.

Absent of the sympathetic reaction of an interested individual, sharing is not necessarily likely to boost positive mood. The sympathetic listener can validate the experience. For instance, if Sally shares her good news of getting a high grade on a final exam with Jim and Jim replies, "That's great! That should help you get that scholarship you've been hoping for," Jim's acknowledgement of the potential positive implications of the event for Sally's future makes the impact of her positive experience more salient and may generate additional positive implications of the event about which she had not previously thought. Testing whether sharing may increase an event's social reality could be a fruitful future study.

Furthermore, we suggest that perhaps sharing something positive has the potential to boost the mood of the listener and thus the person sharing may take pleasure in making someone else feel good, giving the sharer a subsequent lift in mood. For example, if Steve tells his wife Cindy about praise he got from his boss at work, this may have implications for Cindy and would likely make her genuinely happy. Seeing her pleasure is likely not only to make Steve feel good as he re-experiences the praise from his boss, but Steve likely also experiences an added dose of joy for making Cindy excited. This possibility could be examined by future research.

In addition, given that perceiving others are pleased with you is likely to boost self-esteem (e.g., Beach & Tesser, 1995; Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988), feeling better about

the self is another possible explanation for why secondary appraisals inherent in sharing positive events increases positive affective state. Having others respond affirmatively to one's positive experience could facilitate perceiving oneself positively in the eyes of others, known as positive reflected appraisals (Baumeister, 1998; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). In fact, one study found that sharing positive events was significantly correlated with pride (Gable et al., 2004). Thus, feeling better about oneself after having shared the positive event may be responsible for the uptick in positive affect that we noted in our studies. This possibility should be tested by future studies.

### *Upward spirals of broadening and building*

Could sharing positive experiences result in an upward spiral result from a repetition of broadening and building? There is a growing body of evidence supporting this building process. In fact, one recent study demonstrated an upward spiral over a two-month period in which positive affect, broad-minded coping, interpersonal trust, and social support reciprocally and prospectively predicted one another. This upward spiral was partially based in changes in dopaminergic functioning (Burns et al., 2008). Another study found that initial positive affect predicted broad-minded coping and that positive affect and broad-minded coping serially enhanced one another over time (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2008). Thus, it appears that these upward spirals based on positive emotion do occur and sharing positive experiences may enhance the likelihood of these upward spirals from occurring.

### *Limitations and future directions*

One obvious limitation of this study is that the sample was limited to college-aged relationships and may not be representative of more mature relationships or even relationships in the general population. Insofar as theorists expect the impact of sharing with relationship partners to differ across age and culture, they may wish to conduct replications of this work with differently constituted samples. It would also be interesting to examine whether these results would apply to family relationships.

Our findings indicate that sharing and receiving an enthusiastic, supportive response increases positive emotion. But what about those who refrain from sharing their positive experiences with relationship partners? Future research should more closely examine what personality characteristics or situational factors may facilitate or impede sharing their positive experiences. Similarly, additional research is needed to clarify what personal or relationship factors influence the response of the partner.

Some research indicates that participants' expression of a positive event actually created a "crossover effect," such that it increased the positive affect of the partner in addition to that of the participant (Hicks & Diamond, 2008). Perhaps there may be an effect of sharing positive experiences on the positive emotion of one's partner and this could be fruitfully examined by future research.

In an era where technology is prevalent, there are now many different outlets for people to share their positive experiences. Blogging has grown to become one of the most popular methods of online expression. Although blogging has many uses, most Americans use their blogs to express themselves or reflect on their day (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). A fruitful area for future research would be to examine whether sharing positive events through blogging

has a similar effect on positive emotion outcomes as in-person sharing or what differences might exist between sharing through the blogosphere and in-person sharing. Some initial research on blogging has found it to have positive effects on well-being and it has even been suggested as a form of therapy. For example, one particular study demonstrated that blogging improves social capital, which in turn has a positive effect on positive emotion (Ko & Kuo, 2009). Relatedly, another study found that blogging has a positive effect on perceived social support, specifically social integration, reliable alliance, and friendship satisfaction (Baker & Moore, 2008). Future research should build upon these initial findings, taking the results of the current study into account.

## Conclusion

Our research suggests that the sharing of positive life events had a greater impact in terms of positive emotion benefits than writing or having a neutral interaction. Positive emotion, such as happiness and life satisfaction, reach a peak only when participants share their positive experiences and when the relationship partner provides an active-constructive response.

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