

Using Mindful Photography to Increase Positive Emotion and Appreciation

Jaime L. Kurtz

James Madison University

Sonja Lyubomirsky

University of California, Riverside

REFERENCE: Kurtz, J. L., & Lyubomirsky, S. (in press). Using mindful photography to increase positive emotion and appreciation. In J. J. Froh & A. Parks-Sheiner (Eds.), *Positive psychology in higher education: A practical workbook for the classroom*. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Concept

This chapter describes mindful photography, a simple activity that students can use to enhance their appreciation of their everyday life and immediate surroundings. Students use a camera to help them identify and capture things in their lives that are meaningful or positive, and subsequent class discussions can touch on topics of appreciation, savoring, happiness, and the underlying mechanisms that may make this activity effective. Moreover, it can be used to illustrate how empirical research on increasing happiness is commonly done.

Recent research in positive psychology has convincingly demonstrated that people can sustainably increase their happiness by employing effortful cognitive and behavioral strategies (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). One novel classroom activity that can be employed to promote enhance happiness is mindful photography. Recent research suggests that this activity leads to boosts in positive mood and enhanced savoring or appreciation of one's immediate physical environment and one's life in general (Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005). Preliminary data show that students find it engrossing, enjoyable, and thought provoking; indeed, they report it to

be more enjoyable than the well-studied activity of counting one's blessings (Kurtz, 2011). As a classroom activity, mindful photography fits most naturally into lessons on hedonic adaptation, savoring, gratitude, and happiness-increasing strategies. However, as described below, it can easily be modified to complement a variety of topics within courses in positive psychology.

Materials Needed

Each student will need either a digital camera or a cellular phone with a camera. In our experience, nearly all students have one or both of these or can easily borrow one.

Instructions

In all variations of the mindful photography activity, students should receive written instructions, such as:

“Throughout the course of the day today, you will be taking photographs of your everyday life. As you go about this exercise, think about the things in your life that bring you *happiness or joy*. What brings you positive feelings in your daily life? While this is highly personal, some examples might include your favorite scenic view on campus, your closest friends, or your favorite book. Have your camera or camera phone handy and take at least 5 photographs of these things today. Please take the activity seriously and do not rush through it.”

The activity should be done in advance of the class it is designed to complement, so that students arrive in class ready to share their impressions and reactions. This version of the activity is designed to focus specifically on positive emotions; however, the activity is rather unconstrained, with students being allowed to choose their own subject matter. Instructors should feel free to modify the instructions to best suit their purposes. For example, to supplement a discussion on appreciation of natural beauty, instructors may ask students to photograph objects outdoors. Also, we suggest they take five photographs, as this number is sufficiently high to be involving, but not so high that the photography becomes a chore. However, as described later, instructors could slightly vary this number, or experimentally test which number is optimal for their students.

Rather than focusing explicitly on topics that bring them happiness, another variation of the mindful photography exercise has students photograph people or objects that affirm their identity or represent their important goals. Instructions read:

Sometime today, set aside at least 20 minutes. Throughout the course of the day today, you will take photographs of your everyday life. As you go about this exercise, think about the things in your life that are *central to who you are*. If you wanted someone to understand you and what you most care about, how would you capture this? While this is highly personal, some examples might include sports equipment, a memento from a favorite time spent with your romantic partner, or a textbook from your favorite class. Have your camera or camera phone handy and take at least 5 photographs of these things today. Please take the activity seriously and do not rush through it.

This particular variation is effective because it encourages students to focus on what they value most in life and may have broader benefits. For example, research shows that students who engage in such self-affirmation via writing earn higher grades and experience less stress (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Creswell et al., 2005). Although the subject matter students choose for this version of the exercise might resemble the people or objects from the previous version that bring them happiness or joy, the motivation behind the photographs should differ. This particular variation is well suited to a discussion focusing on important life goals that promote the eudaimonic happiness associated with having meaning and purpose (cf. Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008).

An interpersonal component could also be added to a mindful photography exercise. For example, students could be asked to email their photographs to friends or family members or upload their photographs to a social networking site like Facebook™. This process provides students the additional benefit of receiving feedback on their photographs from others who may have a fresh perspective, perhaps helping to further counteract the adaptation process. For example, an out-of-state friend may comment on something that the student has been taking for granted, such as the beauty of his snowy surroundings or on the superiority of his neighborhood

pizza parlor. Also, depending on class size and the amount of time the instructor wishes to devote, another variation may involve students presenting one or two of their favorite photographs to the class, with a brief story of what the photograph means to them. This adds another interpersonal component to the activity, while simultaneously promoting a positive classroom atmosphere.

Data on self-reported appreciation, positive emotions, happiness, and other outcomes of interest can easily be collected before and after the photography activity, so that instructors can determine whether mindful photography is leading to meaningful increases in positive outcomes. Short of these data, students should be eager to engage in thoughtful discussion on the thoughts and feelings they experienced while taking the photographs, and, if applicable, while sharing or discussing them with others.

If instructors wish to test the effectiveness of the different variations of the mindful photography exercise, students could be randomly assigned to one of several photography conditions. Some may be instructed to take photographs of targets that lead them to experience happiness or joy vs. targets that represent their valued goals, as described above, while others may be asked to take photographs without further instruction. Alternatively, students could be randomly assigned to take a different number of photographs (e.g., 3, 5, or 7). In addition to serving as a demonstration for how to conduct, analyze, and interpret experimental studies, results from such class experiments can stimulate an interesting discussion on the most effective implementation strategies. After all, given the practically limitless memory capacity of digital cameras, some individuals could easily take this activity to the extreme. Others, by contrast, might feel inept at photography or become frustrated or burned out over the course of the assignment. Therefore, as is the case with all happiness-increasing strategies, it is important to

question the extent to which this particular strategy is effective, and to explore which variations are optimal.

Discussion

In 1985, Ansel Adams wrote:

Both the grand and the intimate aspects of nature can be revealed in the expressive photograph. Both can stir enduring affirmations and discoveries, and can surely help the spectator in his search for identification with the vast world of natural beauty and the wonder surrounding him.

We believe mindful photography to be effective because it helps people examine their everyday lives in a way that they normally do not – namely, through the lens of a camera, with an eye out for beauty, meaning, and value. Preliminary data on the activity are promising, and students find it to be enjoyable. In the classroom, mindful photography will offer students first-hand experience with a novel mood-boosting activity and can also give them a glimpse into how happiness intervention studies are done. This activity should elicit thoughtful discussion on the underlying processes involved in appreciation, savoring, and happiness.

Directions for a Writing Component

This activity can be easily adapted as a writing exercise. An effective, general prompt might read:

After completing the photography exercise, reflect on the thoughts and feelings you had when: 1) searching for appropriate subject matter, 2) actually taking the photographs., and 3) looking back at the photographs, or sharing them with others (if applicable). Do you feel that it influenced your mood, emotions, and appreciation for things in your life? Why or why not? How long do you think the effects lasted? How could the activity be made *more* effective? Are there certain types of people who might benefit more or less from this activity? How sustainable are these changes? How can you ensure that the changes last?

This prompt encourages students to reflect on their personal experience with the activity while also considering the key psychological mechanisms underlying the benefits of the activity, as

well as potential individual differences. To help encourage in-class discussion, students should complete the writing component prior to class.

References

- Adams, A. (1985). *Ansel Adams: An autobiography*. New York: Bulfinch.
- Bryant, F. B., Smart, C. M., & King, S. P. (2005). Using the past to enhance the present: Boosting happiness through positive reminiscence. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 6, 227-260.
- Cohen, G. L., Garcia, J., Apfel, N., & Master, A. (2006, September 1). Reducing the racial achievement gap: A social-psychological intervention. *Science*, 313, 1307–1310.
- Creswell, J. D., Welch, W., Taylor, S. E., Sherman, D. K., Gruenewald, T., & Mann, T. (2005). Affirmation of personal values buffers neuroendocrine and psychological stress responses. *Psychological Science*, 16, 846–851.
- Kashdan, T. B., Biswas-Diener, R., & King, L. A. (2008). Reconsidering happiness: The costs of distinguishing between hedonics and eudaimonia. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3, 219-233.
- Kurtz, J. L. (2011). *Seeing through new eyes: An experimental investigation of the benefits of mindful photography*. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Psychology, James Madison University.
- *Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). *The how of happiness. A scientific approach to getting the life you want*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K. M., & Schkade, D. (2005). Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change. *Review of General Psychology*, 9, 111-131.