

Positive Psychology Activities: Insight from Neurodivergent Students (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

This classroom study explored how to make positive psychology exercises more accessible to neurodivergent college students. Neurodiversity is an umbrella term for identities linked to autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other neurodevelopmental differences. Students participating in the study engaged in weekly evidence-based activities to support well-being, such as gratitude, acts of kindness, and using strengths as part of a one-credit positive psychology course. Throughout the semester, they provided written responses about the impact, barriers, and accessibility of the activities. Comments indicate that the exercises had a positive impact on perceived wellbeing. We report student feedback and discuss potential applications in student life outside the classroom.

Keywords: neurodiversity, positive psychology, inclusive pedagogy, college students

Positive psychology is the scientific study of human flourishing. The goal of the field is to provide research and analysis that will help individuals and organizations thrive. To date, thousands of peer reviewed research articles related to the field have been published. These studies examine positive emotions, including happiness, and the role of positive psychology interventions (PPI) in wellbeing. In this classroom study, neurodivergent college students had the opportunity to try evidence-based PPI and provide their reactions as part of a one-credit course. The following is a description of the practice as well as commentary from students about their experience.

Across cultures people include happiness as a primary goal in life (Diener, 2000). Studies in this area focus on the ways in which individuals can purposefully increase their happiness and raise levels of wellbeing. A growing body of evidence has documented that PPI can increase well-being. A meta-analysis of 347 studies found that positive psychology interventions, broadly defined to include activities rooted in positive psychology concepts, had a lasting effect

on wellbeing for all age groups (Carr et al., 2019). School-based interventions have been found to increase well-being among adolescents (Tejada-Gallardo et al., 2020). A review study of the efficacy of positive psychology programming for children ages 3-6 years found mixed results, with some increases in positive emotions, engagement, and self-reported life satisfaction (Benoit & Gabola, 2021).

While published studies have documented the effectiveness of PPI with groups including children and adolescents, typically developing college students, individuals across cultures, older adults, and individuals with depression, anxiety, and various physical illness (Craske et al., 2019, Craske et al., 2016, Taylor, et al., 2017), as of this writing there have been no studies on the effectiveness of PPI with neurodivergent college students. Neurodivergent students include those with dyslexia, ADHD, autism, and other neurological differences that can complicate their access to higher education. Students who have a condition that affects learning often need reasonable accommodations to overcome barriers they face when accessing edu-

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cational resources (Clouder et al., 2020; Shmulsky, 2022). Many students also experience co-occurring anxiety, mood, substance abuse, and stress related issues (Faraone et al., 2021; Rosen et al., 2021).

Previous research has identified four moderating variables that affect the efficacy of PPI: timing, variety, motivation, and person-activity fit (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013; Nelson & Lyubomirsky, 2014). The present study focuses on the last variable, exploring how neurodivergent college students experience positive psychology interventions. We present students' views on the effectiveness of PPI, obstacles they faced, and ideas for making the activities more accessible.

Classroom Study Setting

This classroom study was conducted at a post-secondary institution with a neurodiversity mission, which serves students who have received a diagnosis that affects learning, including autism, ADHD, learning disabilities, and combinations of these conditions as well as co-occurring anxiety and depression. Students at the College earn associate and bachelor's degrees while immersed in a culture that promotes self-advocacy, strengths-based education, and the understanding of neurodiversity within a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) framework.

While the educational environment fosters acceptance, students in the community often discuss stress linked to their diagnoses, including anecdotes about the impact of stigma, internalized ableism, and self-reported trauma from previous educational experiences. Given students' expressed needs, the college supports wellness initiatives in both student affairs and academic affairs.

Participants

Participants were sophomores and juniors recruited from a one-credit, graded course in positive psychology. For the purpose of this study, we categorized participants under the broad umbrella of neurodiversity and did not collect information about specific diagnoses. To ensure students would have previous college experience to draw on for reflection questions, the course was offered at the 2000-level and had two prerequisites: 1000-level writing and any 1000-level social science. The students who agreed to participate completed and reported on class activities as a part of regularly assigned work.

Positive Psychology Activities

Thirteen students enrolled in Positive Psychology Activities course and one additional student audited the class. Over a 15-week semester, students engaged in nine separate activities as well as a reflective project at the end of the term. The activities are adapt-

ed from a protocol referred to as Positive Affective Treatment (PAT), a series of activities designed to enhance wellbeing by focusing on the positive aspects of one's life, such as savoring, gratitude, and using strengths (Taylor, et al., 2017). We use the term "positive psychology activities" because this application is classroom based, not clinical. The title of each activity and a brief description are in Table 1.

Each week, students focused on a single activity from Table 1. During class, students reflected on their experience and planned for the upcoming week. For the first half of class, they answered short, open-ended reflection questions about the impact of each exercise and how to make it more neurodiversity accessible. Answers were collected in the student submission portion of the course web page. Reflection questions included the following: (a) How did this activity affect you? (b) What barriers, if any, did you encounter? (c) How could the activity be made more accessible?

For the second half of class, the instructor presented a new activity. The presentation included the name of the activity, brief citations of research supporting the efficacy of the activity, and directions for how to do the activity. Activities were adapted to make them doable in one week as homework. The table above provides abbreviated directions excerpted from the course web page.

Observed Outcomes

Eleven students gave informed consent to use their homework responses to assess the activities. Students uploaded individual written responses to Canvas, the learning management system (LMS), which is password protected and accessible by the instructor. To maximize students' freedom to participate candidly, a person other than the classroom instructor sought consent, and the names of participants were hidden from the instructor until after the semester concluded.

After grades were submitted, the instructor collected participant responses that had been posted to the LMS. To spot-check responses, the instructor downloaded samples from three points in the semester: beginning, middle, and end. With this approach, there was a maximum of 33 responses for each question. Each participant could have contributed a maximum of three responses per question.

Once the responses were extracted and de-identified, researchers independently noted trends and themes regarding the perceived impact of activities in the class, barriers, and suggestions for accessibility. Researchers compared individual findings and distilled main ideas that emerged from the students' aggregated written responses. The list below contains the themes identified and agreed-up by both researchers.

Table 1*Positive Psychology Activities**

Activity Name	Directions to Students (abbreviated)
Notice and amplify the good	Plan 1-2 hours of positive activities and savor them. Pay attention to sensory details of your experience. Normally we think of savoring food, but it can also be walking, showering, exercising, doing art, socializing, or another activity.
Gratitude	Write down 3-5 things you are thankful for each night this week. They can be small or big. It's okay to repeat items on your list.
Acts of kindness	Perform 5 acts of kindness this week. They can be random or focused on family and friends. If you are doing a random act of kindness, please be aware of others' boundaries. Examples include listening with empathy, doing a chore, calling someone, and offering help.
Pleasure, engagement, and meaning	Complete 3 positive activities during the week, one of each type: pleasurable, engaging, meaningful. Pleasure: Activities that feel good. Engagement: Activities that absorb your attention. Meaning: Activities that meet an important goal or are central to your identity.
Finding strengths	Explore your strengths by getting information from 3 sources: Self-reflection, someone who knows you well, and an online quiz. For this activity, please visit the Canvas homepage for a link to the online quiz.
Using strengths	Identify and complete 2 activities this week that use your strengths. Set aside 30-60 minutes to employ each of your top two strengths and reflect on the experience.
Values	Read a list of values on the Canvas page. Reflect on your top 3. To illustrate, take pictures of aspects of your life that represent your values and post the images.
Optimism	Imagine and visualize your best self in the future. Consider social relationships, education/occupation, and daily activities. Take notes on what you could do to realize your best self in one of these areas.
Make someone happy	Invest time and effort to make someone else happier. Examples include eating a meal with someone, doing homework with someone, offering to clean up a community space, picking up litter, and leaving a message of encouragement in a shared space.
My top four positive exercises	Review the nine positive psychology exercises we studied in class. Profile your top 4 and make a how-to booklet.

Note. *Abbreviated list of activities adapted from Taylor, Lyubomirsky, & Stein (2017), p. 269.

Perceived Impact

Participants were asked to discuss the impact of each activity. Out of 29 responses, the vast majority stated that the activity had a positive impact. Twenty-two responses indicated that the activities improved wellbeing, with respondents noting, “It made my mood more calm, focused, and stress free,” and, “It definitely gave me a positive mood boost.” One participant explained that the activities were easy: “Doing this activity for class reminded me that a simple little exercise can improve my mood and my well-being.”

Not all comments were positive. Six respondents claimed that the activities had little impact-- “the activity did not really have an impact on my mood or my life”--or even a negative impact: “This was stressful.”

Barriers to the Activity

A goal of this project is to ascertain how to make positive psychology activities more accessible to neurodivergent students. To that end, we asked participants to list barriers they perceived. For this question, there were 29 separate responses. Three responses noted that there were no barriers. The remaining responses covered a range of barriers in the areas of organization/planning and social/emotional functioning.

The organization/planning barriers included difficulty finding the time to do the activity, remembering to do the activity, issues with planning, mind-wandering, and difficulty switching gears. For example, one participant noted their busy schedule: “The obstacle was finding the time to do the activity.” Another wrote, “I had trouble making it happen, both on an executive function and perfectionism level. For EF, I had to remember (author emphasis) to do it. For perfectionism, I think most of my ideas were overly optimistic and idealistic.”

Participants also noted social/emotional obstacles. Several participants mentioned that social anxiety can inhibit the positive psychology activities that are focused on other people, for example, “acts of kindness” and “make someone else happy.” One individual commented, “Anyone who is autistic or struggles with social pragmatics for other reasons, could find certain activities difficult in terms of social anxiety.” Another noted, “some people suffer from anxiety or depression making it more difficult to make someone else happy.” Several responses focused on difficulty reading people as a barrier to activities assigned in class. For example, one participant wrote, “Sometimes I don’t know what people are thinking or what they need.”

Neurodiversity-Friendly Recommendations

The last question asked neurodivergent students how to make positive psychology activities more accessible. We reviewed 31 comments about how the activities could be adapted. To be included in the list below, the recommendation had to come up in at least three different responses.

Help Getting Started

Participants suggested starting the activities in class to gain clarity and momentum. One person wrote, “This activity could be more neurodiverse-friendly by having students come up with what they are going to do in class and give them time to do it.” The idea of using class time to think concretely about how to do the activity came up repeatedly and is linked to the recommendation for explicit directions.

Explicit Directions

Several respondents noted the importance of providing explicit directions and examples. When asked what would make the activities more accessible, one participant wrote, “Having a discussion about different concrete examples of activities, like we did, helps clarify how to go about the activity in an approachable and accessible way.” Another stated, “Probably laying out explicitly what savoring [activity title] should feel like for those who second guess themselves.”

Small Chunks

Participants suggested breaking the activity into steps. For example, one participant suggested, “This exercise could be more accessible by breaking it into chunks.” They also noted the importance of setting realistic goals. “Scale down [the activity] and help students with realistic planning, i.e., frame it as ‘pick something you could do tonight,’ or as just an ordinary, everyday activity.”

Group Work

Respondents said providing a group work option could make the activities more neurodiversity friendly. For example, one individual wrote, “Social accountability! Maybe give students in the class a buddy to meet with outside class to do the activity.” Another mentioned the value of working with others, adding, “A partner could also serve as reassurance or validation of certain strengths for students who doubt the magnitude of their strengths.”

Other recommendations mentioned once or twice in the comments include adapting the activities for sensory issues, providing visual organizers, providing more options, and adapting the activities so students can use their strengths.

Summary of Outcomes

Overall, students reported that positive psychology activities had a positive impact on their wellbeing. In open-ended questions, participants cited organization/planning and social/emotional barriers to doing the activities, including challenges scheduling the activities, completing the activities, and managing interpersonal aspects of activities involving other people. They also made recommendations for how these activities could be more accessible from a neurodiversity perspective. The top four recommendations were to provide help getting started, breaking down the activity, explicit directions, and group options. Additional recommendations included making adaptations for sensory issues, providing choice, and cueing students use their strengths.

Portability and Possible Further Application

A goal of this classroom study was to understand the experience and insight of neurodiverse students who engaged in positive psychology activities. In this project, the activities were part of a credit-bearing course, which offered the benefit of structure and incentive for students to participate. We envision that positive psychology activities could also be employed in non-academic settings focused on student wellbeing, such as wellness and mental health programming. Adaptations of these exercises have the potential to add value to any co-curricular programming where student growth is part of the mission, including training programs for student leaders, residence hall programming, disability programming, diversity centers, student government, athletic programs, Greek life, clubs, and other locations for organized student activity. Awareness of what works—and what gets in the way—can increase access to the potential benefits of positive psychology.

This was a classroom study in a unique environment, and thus it may not be replicable elsewhere. The primary limitation is the small sample size; students who consented to have their work collected may not be representative of neurodivergent college students more generally. Similarly, students who chose to attend a neurodiversity-focused college may not represent the wider population. The curriculum at this institution aims to develop student self-knowledge and self-advocacy skills. Consequently, the participants in the study may be atypical in their ability to generate insight about what helps and hinders their learning. Further studies about the utility of positive psychology exercises could focus on subgroups of students who may benefit from activities that promote wellness, such as students from cultural minorities or notably pressurized majors, students experiencing

mental health challenges, and neurodivergent students from traditional campuses or online programs.

The term neurodivergent can be used to describe students with a wide range of learning differences. The small group participating in this classroom study included individuals with diagnoses of autism, dyslexia, and ADHD. Their reports of barriers to access included comments on difficulties getting started, the need for more explicit directions, anxiety related to approaching others, and the desire for increased collaborations. Whether directly related to a disability or common to college students more generally, it is beneficial to address these challenges so that more students can benefit from wellness measures like these.

Given well-documented levels of stress experienced by college students (Barbayannis, et al., 2022), student mental health is an important consideration for colleges and universities. Positive psychology activities can be one element in a whole-institution approach to wellness. Skills that students learn by practicing positive psychology, such as gratitude and using one's strengths, are useful in the moment may be valuable later as students progress through academics and into employment. By exploring the specific experience of neurodiverse students, we hope to provide insight about how to make these exercises useful to a wider audience.

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