

# Integrating Positive Psychology, Expressive Arts, and Yoga for a Happier Life

On the surface, positive psychology, the expressive arts, and yoga appear to be three different entities. As one investigates these approaches more, however, many similar threads run through these activities tying together important concepts like happiness and finding meaning in life. By integrating these approaches in a therapy setting, we tap a hidden potential for more effective client care and positive outcomes.

## The Limitations of Talk Therapy

Traditional psychotherapy, or talk therapy, has certain limitations. Some people find it difficult to express their problems verbally. Others find it hard to open up in traditional settings. For example, children struggling with trauma may find it difficult to trust and converse with an unfamiliar adult.

Another limitation of talk therapy is the focus on the pathology. Using the Disease Model, psychotherapists generally seek what is wrong with a client and interventions on how to fix it. When someone is labeled as sick, troubled, or mentally ill, the focus on the client's problems potentially makes him or her feel inadequate, not "normal", and even ostracized.

Yoga, expressive arts, and positive psychology seek to build on the strengths of clients and how they could use them to provide new avenues of communication and self-exploration. Furthermore, since human beings are generally playful animals, using techniques bringing out the sense of play can potentially be more engaging and cathartic for the client.

By taking a closer look at each of these approaches, we begin to uncover how they can be used together to better help clients achieve their best possible life.

## Positive Psychology

Prior to the Second World War, psychology devoted its studies to [three main tasks](#). They included:

- Curing mental illness
- Improve normal lives
- Identify and nurture high talent

Unfortunately, due to the lack of resources and funding caused by the war, psychology had to narrow its focus and use all available resources finding ways to treat psychological illness and

psychopathology. The Disease Model gave psychologists a framework for treating mental illness. Though this helped find treatments for previously incurable mental illnesses, the focus on improving normal lives and cultivating high talent fell by the wayside.

It wasn't until the later part of the twentieth century that Martin Seligman pioneered the concept of Positive Psychology. Simply put, Positive Psychology is "the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive." The field believes people want to live meaningful, fulfilling lives. This involves cultivating the best of themselves by enhancing experiences of love, work, and play.

[Martin Seligman](#) took a scientific approach to determining happiness. Using the scientific method, he used exhaustive questionnaires to discover what really made people happy. His findings suggested how people could find happiness and more meaning in their lives. Three important aspects of Seligman's work are the "signature strengths", Three Dimensions of Happiness, and the core elements creating happiness known as the the PERMA model.

## Signature Strengths

As mentioned earlier, much of modern psychology focuses on what is wrong with people. Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson set out to catalog what is right about people, otherwise known as their "signature strengths."

These are strengths a person owns, celebrates, and frequently uses as a means to live a happier, more fulfilling life. The twenty-four signature strengths are divided into six different categories. The categories are virtues Seligman found to be present in just about every culture. By cultivating the strengths in each category, one can eventually attain these desirable virtues. Here is an outline of the strengths based on an article from [MeaningandHappiness.com](#):

Wisdom and Knowledge: Strengths involving the acquisition and use of knowledge.

- Creativity
- Curiosity
- Open-mindedness
- Love of learning
- Perspective

Strengths of Courage: Emotional strengths helping the will to accomplish goals and face internal or external opposition.

- Bravery
- Persistence
- Integrity
- Vitality

Strengths of Humanity: Interpersonal strengths involving befriending and tending to others.

- Love
- Kindness
- Social Intelligence

Strengths of Justice: Civic strengths contributing to a healthy community life.

- Citizenship
- Fairness
- Leadership

Strengths of Temperance: Personal strengths helping to protect against excess.

- Forgiveness and mercy
- Humility and modesty
- Prudence
- Self-regulation or control

Strengths of Transcendence: Strengths forging connections to the larger universe often providing meaning to life.

- Appreciation of beauty and excellence
- Gratitude
- Hope
- Humor
- Spirituality

Seligman sees strengths as moral traits that can be learned and developed. This involves exercising these strengths daily to achieve the desired virtue. As one continues to cultivate these strengths, they progress through the Three Dimensions of Happiness.

## The Three Dimensions of Happiness

Seligman noted happiness was a progression. It starts with personal gratification and, through work and effort, progresses to a life full of meaning and authenticity. He defines these [dimensions](#) as:

**The Pleasant Life:** This dimension involves learning to savor and appreciate the basic pleasures of life. When people can think constructively about the past and be optimistic about the future, they will experience more happiness in the present. Seligman recommended people break habitual behaviors and use mindfulness to truly savor experiences leading to a more enjoyable present. The pleasant life is associated with pleasure and gratification.

**The Good Life:** Involves discovering our unique virtues and strengths and creatively using them to enhance our lives. As mentioned earlier, by regularly exercising signature strengths, one can achieve these virtues and achieve “abundant gratification and authentic happiness.” The good life is a place of happiness in relationships, work, and personal development.

**The Meaningful Life:** Involves taking those developed strengths and virtues a step further. The meaningful life is when we find a deep sense of fulfillment by using our strengths and virtues for a purpose greater than ourselves. When someone applies their unique strengths and talents towards a greater goal for community or humanity, they transcend the mundane pursuit of pleasure and personal gain associated with the pleasant and good life with authentic altruism and purpose in life.

## Seligman’s PERMA Model

In addition to defining signature strengths and dimensions of happiness, Seligman developed the PERMA model. This [theoretical model of happiness](#) describes the five core elements needed for psychological well-being and happiness. Seligman believes the following elements can help a person discover a life of fulfillment and meaning:

### Positive Emotion (P)

Focusing on positive emotions helps create an optimistic perspective of the past, present, and future. By embracing positive emotions, one not only focuses on the joys of life, but sees challenges and low points as an opportunity to grow and learn.

### Engagement (E)

Finding activities requiring us to use full engagement. Seligman expanded on the work of his contemporary, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of “flow”. Flow refers to the activities we engage in requiring our total attention and concentration. These activities are so engrossing we temporarily lose track of time and place. They promote our intelligence, skills, and emotional capabilities. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi agree to a correlation between to one’s experience of flow and a sense of purpose in life.

### Relationships (R)

As social beings, relationships are very important to us. We crave love, intimacy, and strong emotional bonds with others on various levels. Relationships provide support, a sense of belonging, and a chance to use signature strengths to help others.

### Meaning (M)

When we engage in activities other than mundane tasks or pursuits of wealth and pleasure, we begin to find meaning in our daily existence. This comes in many forms and is different for each person. Someone can find more meaning in life by examining their choices for work, play, and

expression. While discovering what is really important to a person, a greater sense of happiness and fulfillment is achieved.

### Accomplishments (A)

We gain a better satisfaction for life when we use our strengths and ambitions to accomplish our goals. By starting with manageable, realistic goals towards happiness, we begin to feel more confident and self-reliant to make bigger, more positive changes in our lives. Setting goals also allows us to have a better perspective and awareness how using our strengths can lead to a happier, more meaningful life.

Seligman's PERMA model is an excellent starting point to realizing how and why expressive arts, Positive Psychology, and yoga can help people live happier, more fulfilling lives. By understanding how these core elements factor into the pursuit of happiness, counselors and others in helping professions can better serve their clients.

## Positive Psychology Interventions

Several [Positive Psychological Interventions](#) (PPIs) have been created around theoretically-grounded and evidence-based activities, instructions, exercises, and recommendations. These strength-based approaches offer new opportunities for promoting mental health and improving psychological and emotional resilience.

PPIs are not just for therapists. Coaches, counselors, social workers, and professionals can use PPIs to enhance clients' strengths making them more active in pursuing happiness. Some PPIs can be easily be adapted based on the client's abilities.

There are many PPIs available emphasizing diverse subjects such as gratitude, creativity, forgiveness, mindfulness, engagement and flow, savoring, and strengths' awareness. When practitioners recommend a PPI, they must take into consideration the client's personality, age, gender, culture and other personal and social variations to ensure the PPI is a person-activity fit.

Learn more about PPIs at the [Positive Psychology Program's website](#).

## The Expressive Arts

For centuries, the expressive arts have played an important role in human civilization. Human's ability to express and communicate complex emotions and concepts has evolved dramatically over time. From early cave drawings and tribal rituals using drumming and music, humans have evolved in their ability to express themselves to create masterpiece paintings, brilliant music, dramatic plays, and thought-provoking literature.

In modern times, many people turn to the expressive arts for entertainment. Broadway plays, blockbuster films, best-selling books, and popular music are a big source of spending in the global economy. People go out dancing to let off some steam after a long week of work. Most people have those go-to songs or movies when they are celebrating happiness or needing consolation. With the boom of the internet, accessing art is easier than ever. Just think of the last time you binge watched a television series on Netflix or downloaded the newest novel from your favorite author in seconds.

Luckily, using the expressive arts isn't just for elite celebrities, virtuosos, and crafty wordsmiths. The arts are accessible to everyone. Many people use them as a creative outlet for their inner thoughts and feelings. Even if it is just doodling during a boring meeting, belting out your favorite song in the shower, or journaling about your day, it is an opportunity for expression. The expressive arts gives everyone a chance to seek meaning, clarity, and healing in their lives. It's a great way to work through difficult emotions without resorting to more negative behaviors like substance abuse, violence, or self-harm. And, more importantly, it is an option when talking just isn't enough.

It is not a surprise the expressive arts have found their way into an accessible, therapeutic process helping those with various mental health conditions.

## Expressive Arts Therapy

In the 1970s, Paolo Knill, a leader in the [expressive arts therapy](#) movement, founded the International Network of Expressive Arts Therapy Training Centers. This multimodal approach to therapy incorporates writing, art, drama, dance, movement, and music by trained therapists. Unlike Art Therapists, Music Therapists, or Dance/Movement Therapists, expressive arts therapists may not be experts in all areas of art—they rely on their creativity and training to decide which modality to use for a particular session. Some may use multiple modalities in a single session.

Expressive arts therapy is accessible to everyone. The focus is not on the outcomes of the chosen arts, but the process of creating and the therapeutic effect of the creative experience. During sessions, expressive arts therapists will describe a process but not give specific directives as how the person should create. Instead, the therapist provides encouragement while noting and exploring the client's reactions, responses, and insights while he or she is working with pictures, sounds, movements, and other media.

For example, a simple activity like finger painting could be used in a session. The therapist provides finger paints and gives a directive such as, "paint something important to you." As the client works on the project, the therapist takes notes of the colors, lines, work patterns, and composition. Also observed are the behaviors, work rate, and nonverbal cues while the client works on the painting. From there, the therapist will discuss the painting, what feelings were

present, and may ask the individual to tell a story about the piece. A guided processing session is key to the therapeutic aspect of the project.

## Who Does Expressive Arts Therapy Help?

With all the modalities available for expressive arts therapy, those with a wide range of emotional, behavioral, or mental health issues have benefited from this practice. Anxiety, depression, PTSD, addictions, chronic medical conditions, social isolation, and stress are just a few of the conditions treated with expressive arts.

Expressive arts therapy focuses on [four main areas of personal development](#):

- Expression
- Imagination
- Active participation
- Mind-body connection

When someone engages in expressive arts therapy, they have a safe place to promote self-growth and work through problems while strengthening their creative awareness.

It is important to note expressive arts therapists, as well as the other professionals using the expressive arts, are specifically trained in using art as a healing modality. Working with art as a means of therapy has the potential to bring up intense, raw emotions in a client, especially those working through grief, trauma, or abuse. Without the proper counseling training, someone using art to work through difficult emotions can do more harm than good for a client.

This is not to say art shouldn't be used as way to help others feel happier and more fulfilled. Expressive art can be an excellent outlet for someone without having to dig deep into the psyche. The focus and effort put into expressive art can be an excellent form of active mindfulness where a person can feel more grounded and self-aware. In addition, practicing expressive art can provide a sense of accomplishment, camaraderie with others, and enhanced meaning in life.

## Understanding Yoga and Its Benefits

Yoga has steadily gained popularity in many parts of the world for its health and wellness benefits. The practice of yoga involves creating a mind-body connection through movements of the body, breathing exercises, spiritual practices, and meditation techniques. While some people practice yoga for physical fitness and to reduce stress, others see it as a complete lifestyle philosophy.

The Sanskrit word 'yoga' is translated as "to join" or "union." Practicing yoga ultimately leads a person to the union of individual consciousness and God. This creates a perfect harmony

between the mind and body as well as man and nature. The goal of yoga is self-realization which helps overcome different sufferings.

## A Brief History of Yoga

Like expressive arts, many believe [Yoga started at the dawn of civilization](#). According to yogic lore, several thousands of years ago, the first yogi imparted his profound knowledge on the legendary Saptarishis or “seven sages”. These sages spread the yogic sciences to different parts of the world including Asia, the Middle East, Northern Africa, and South America. In India, the yogic system reached its fullest expression. Agastya, the sage travelling across India, created a culture centered around the yogic way of life. Modern scholars noted, amazingly, at the close parallels of yogic knowledge found among ancient cultures across the globe.

Historical evidence of yoga has been noted as far back as 2700 B.C. The classical period of yoga, often known as the time between 500 B.C. and 800 A.D., is considered the most prominent period in the history and development of yoga. During this period, two of India’s greatest religious teachers--Mahavir and Buddha--developed the Five Great Vows (Pancha mahavrata) and eightfold path, respectively. The Bhagawadgita was also developed describing the concepts of Gyan yoga, Bhakti yoga, and Karma Yoga--considered some of the best examples of human wisdom--that are still used today.

From 800 A.D. to 1700 is considered the Post Classical period of yoga. Many teachers contributed a great deal of information during this period. The Hatha yoga tradition (one commonly used today involving movement and breathing) became a common practice during this period.

The Modern period of yoga (1700 to 1900 AD) saw the development and increasing popularity of Raja yoga. Vedanta, Bhakti, Natha, and Hatha-yoga also played a big role in this period. In our contemporary world, yoga practices have continued to spread across the globe inspiring millions to use them for preservation, maintenance, and promotion of health and spirituality.

You could read a more detailed version of this history at the [Government of India’s Ministry of External Affairs](#).

## Types of Yoga Practices

According to Yoga philosophy, there are [four main yoga paths](#) to enlightenment. These sets of spiritual practices have their own components helping one discover a blissful life and form a union with God. Each path leads to the same destination, so one chooses their path based on their personalities and preferences.

### Karma Yoga

Karma yoga is considered the yoga of action. It encourages one to make conscious decisions to act kindly and selflessly. It emphasizes not only doing selfless acts, but having the right attitude while doing them. Through prayer, worship, and ritual, one surrenders to God's will and dedicates to a life of serving others.

## Bhakti Yoga

Bhakti means "love" or "devotion". The nine practices of Bhakti Yoga seek to connect one with God and see God in all things. During prayer, worship, and ritual one forms a union with God and can channel the unconditional love and devotion to all forms of life.

## Jnana

Jnana Yoga is the yoga of knowledge or wisdom. It emphasizes deep contemplation through meditation and studying sacred scriptures. By practicing the many techniques of Jnana Yoga, a person is able to dissolve the "veils of ignorance" and form a union with God.

## Raja Yoga

Raja yoga involves learning to control our physical and mental actions. Eight Limbs of Raja Yoga (see below) outline steps to purify the body and mind to ultimately achieve enlightenment. These include specific rules to live by, internal practices like meditation and concentration, postures and breathing practices.

Some of the fundamentals of Raja Yoga make up the physical practice many from Western cultures recognize as yoga or Hatha yoga. Hatha is a blanket term for the physical yoga practice involving postures and breathing exercises. This style of yoga is generally slower and more relaxed than other styles of physical yoga, so it is great for beginners. There are several other physical yoga practices such as Restorative, Sivananda, Kundalini, and Bikram allowing someone the opportunity to discover what physical yoga practice is best for them.

## The Eight Limbs of Yoga

Like Positive Psychology, the [Yoga Sutras of Patanjali](#) outlines elements for living a meaningful, purposeful life. These are often depicted as a tree with eight limbs. They include:

- **Yama:** Refers to vows, practices, or disciplines concerned with our world and our interactions with it. They involve moral disciplines, vows, and restraints. Five yamas describe virtuous actions like nonviolence, honesty, not stealing, using energy properly, and not hoarding or being greedy.
- **Niyama:** Involves healthy observances and duties directed to ourselves. They include cleanliness, contentment, burning of desire, self-study and reflection, and surrendering to a higher power. They are intended to build character on the path to enlightenment.
- **Asana:** This is the physical aspect of yoga. Though they can refer to the many poses of yoga, the Patanjali gives specific alignment instructions for the practice of meditation. The idea is to sit in comfort so we aren't pulled by the aches and pains of our bodies.

Though some asanas can be challenging. It is important to use comfortable postures where it is easy to remain steady and focused.

- **Pranayama:** This refers to energy or life force keeping us alive. Breathing, of course, is a big part of this. By working with different breathing techniques, we could alter the mind in a variety of ways including calming and stimulation.
- **Pratyahara:** This involves sensory withdrawal to change our state of mind so we could become what we desire to focus on. Closely related to pranayama, it allows us to become grounded and focused on the present moment without being affected by the many distractions of the world around us.
- **Dharana:** Means “focused concentration”. Related to pranayama and pratyahara, it involves withdrawing from the senses and putting all focus on the point of concentration. This could mean the breath or an object as in the practice of candle gazing.
- **Dhyana:** Is the practice of being absorbed in meditation. The many techniques help us to settle, focus, and concentrate. This is just a starting point, though. True meditation isn’t something actually done, but a spontaneous reaction leading to an absorbed state.
- **Samadhi:** This final step of the yoga sutras is referred to as “bliss” or “enlightenment”. After we harmonize our inward and outward selves, we can finally enjoy bliss. This doesn’t mean escaping into some deep meditative state, but realizing, without disturbance from the mind, the very life in front of us.

As you could see, practicing yoga is much more than the time you spend contorting on a mat. It teaches fundamental skills necessary for creating a better balance of the mind and body as well our inner and outer worlds. Like Positive Psychology, it involves mindful living, development of virtues, and using personal strengths to live a more meaningful life.

## The Benefits of Yoga

The benefits of yoga have been well documented. In addition to increasing spirituality and the mind/body/spirit connection, yoga has several health benefits. Consider it a readily available, all-natural form of maintaining wellness and treating certain conditions. The more physical forms of yoga are known to build strength, flexibility, and help with weight loss. In addition, regular yoga helps a person manage stress, moods, and deal with chronic pain or medical conditions. This is partly due to yoga decreasing the response of the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight) which, in turn, reduces stress hormones in the body. You could read more about the benefits of Yoga in an [article from the Yoga Journal](#).

## Putting it all Together: How Yoga, Expressive Arts, and Positive Psychology Can Work Together to Enhance Happiness

Using Seligman's PERMA model, let's examine how these three modalities interact with the five core elements necessary for happiness and well-being.

### Positive Emotions

One important characteristic these three modalities have in common is the need for the person to be in the present moment. Whether it is working on a difficult yoga pose, drawing a picture to describe feelings, or savoring a joyful moment of the day, a certain degree of mindfulness is needed while participating. When a person is focused on the present moment, their worries and thoughts about the past and/or future fade. As someone becomes better at being in the present, they are able to slow and/or detach from their mind's constant inner chatter. This makes it easier to deal with difficult emotions and identify how thoughts affect the way a person feels.

### Engagement

Another key similarity with these three modalities is the adaptability of the activities. With so many types of yoga practices, it is easy to find one that resonates with the person. In addition the poses often could be modified to meet the person where they are at physically and mentally. As mentioned earlier, expressive arts activities are not so much focused on the end result as the creative process and therapeutic effect. This means the person doesn't need to be an artist to engage in the activity, just the desire to create. Positive psychology activities typically involve a person using their signature strengths to achieve a desired outcome. People are more likely to engage in an activity when it uses their strengths as opposed to exploiting their weaknesses.

As mentioned earlier, when a person is fully immersed in an activity, they enter the state of "flow". This is when the activity is challenging and engaging enough for a person without being too frustrating or boring. Those regularly finding activities giving them that timeless sensation of flow have reported being happier and defining more meaning in life.

### Relationships

There are various ways relationships could develop or improve while using these modalities. On the surface, when someone goes into a yoga class or expressive arts experience, they have the opportunity to meet other like-minded people. When going to these classes becomes a habit, the person sees these peers often and may develop friendships and even a support network. Furthermore, a [Stanford University study](#) suggested in settings where people act in synchronicity, such as singing, dancing, or yoga, there can be an increase in cooperation and collectivism among group members.

One study by the National Center for Creative Aging suggests older, established [artists are less likely to suffer loneliness and depression](#) while more likely to engage in volunteer and philanthropic work. By volunteering and reaching out to others, they find a higher purpose and are able to engage in the meaningful life.

Since these modalities help make a person more emotionally intelligent and self-aware, the skills they learn can strengthen current relationships and give insights how his or her actions affect relationships.

## Meaning

Finding meaningful activities beyond the mundane, daily grind is a key to achieving happiness. These three modalities offer experiences letting individuals see life in new perspectives. As they continue with these modalities and find joy in them, they see the importance and value of sticking with these activities.

Meaning may come in the form of a mind/body/spirit connection, being able to reach out to others to give or receive support, or the insights gained from being engaged in the activities. For example, [a recent study by the University East London found](#) those practicing yoga regularly at least twice a week reported more gratitude and a higher sense meaning in their lives.

## Accomplishments

Yoga, Expressive Arts, and positive psychology all require a degree of self-control, discipline, and awareness. One way to motivate a person to engage in these activities is by setting goals. It could be something small like writing five good things that happened during the day or holding a certain yoga pose for a set amount of time. Or it may be a little more ambitious, like creating an entire dance routine or journaling each day for a half hour. By setting goals, it empowers an individual to use his or her strengths to accomplish them. Even if the goals aren't accomplished, there are still lessons learned or adaptations to explore.

## Integrating Yoga, Expressive Arts, and Positive Psychology in Treatment

Now that we've taken a closer look at each of the modalities and how they each easily contribute to Seligman's PERMA model of happiness, here are some ideas for integrating these three modalities into a client's holistic treatment.

Since these three modalities build on a person's strengths, it is best to have a good working knowledge about a client's strengths. This could be done through assessments or interviewing the client. Some questions you might want to consider while preparing a multidimensional treatment plan:

- What does my client feel he or she does well?
- What interests and beliefs does my client have regarding arts, spirituality, etc.?
- How physically active is my client?
- What does my client want to work on the most?

- How can my client's strengths give opportunities to live happier and address need areas?
- What areas of the PERMA model is my client lacking? How could these interventions help?

Once the groundwork is established, find complementary activities from the vast toolbox of these three modalities to create a layered approach to treatment. There are nearly endless combinations of opportunities to explore with the client. As a bonus, some exercises and activities can be practiced outside the therapy setting and applied to real-life situations.

Let's look at a couple examples:

A client that is typically active wants to work through bouts of anxiety, so you show her a couple yoga poses to feel more grounded and balanced. Then, she develops a short dance routine to do after the yoga poses to "shake out" the anxiety. Finally have her work on some mindfulness-based Positive Psychology Interventions, so she is better able to calm and identify/detach from anxious thoughts.

A client struggling with developing positive relationships may start a gratitude journal writing about the good qualities he noticed in people around him. Then the client could use drama to act out some relationship scenarios. Finally, he could practice a loving-kindness meditation daily as a means to grow compassion and see others in a new light. In addition, the client could start going to a beginning yoga class to learn the practice and notice how others interact in the class.

A younger client with depression doesn't see much motivation to improve his situation. While assessing the client, you find he enjoys comic books and superheroes. As a way to cultivate more meaning in his life, you decide to focus on developing his sense of courage. By teaching a couple of the warrior yoga poses, you advise the client to do these poses and imagine he is a warrior anytime his feelings seem unmanageable. Then the client could discover more of his strengths by completing a "signature strengths" assessment. Once the client determines his signature strengths, have him draw a coat of arms highlighting his strengths to hang up in his room.

As you could see, adding these approaches to a traditional therapy session allows for a metaphorical one-two-three punch of treatment. Not only do the approaches compliment each other, they give your client a locus of control where he or she has exercises to actively engage in the healing process.

As a final word, successfully using these modalities in treatment could require you to actively participate in them. After all, the best way to explain or understand how things work is by having first hand experience. Consider taking a yoga class or seeing how art or journaling can help

you. Find out more about Positive Psychology Interventions and try a few yourself. We are much more effective therapists when we walk the talk.

This is by no means an exhaustive review how these three modalities can integrate to form more comprehensive, engaging treatment. This is merely a starting point to investigating how to use these approaches for the benefit of your clients.

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