

# Training character strengths makes you happy

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Anyone who trains character strengths increases their sense of well-being, a large-scale study conducted by a team of psychologists from the University of Zurich has concluded. It proved for the first time that this kind of training works. The largest impact was evident in training the strengths "curiosity," "gratitude," "optimism," "humor," and "enthusiasm."

Character strengths can be defined as traits that are rated as morally positive. That they are positively linked to life satisfaction has already been shown in many studies. That they have a causal effect on life satisfaction and that practicing them triggers an increase in the sense of wellbeing, however, has now been proved by Willibald Ruch, René T. Proyer and Claudia Buschor from the Department of Personality and Assessment at the University of Zurich for the first time.

## Practice pays off

For their current study, the team of researchers randomly divided a sample of 178 adults into three groups: While one group trained the strengths "[curiosity](#)", "[gratitude](#)", "optimism", "[humor](#)" and "enthusiasm" for a period of ten weeks, the second group worked with the strengths "appreciation of beauty", "creativity", "kindness", "love of learning" and "foresight". The third group served as a control and did not do any exercises. The authors of the study recorded three main results: There was particularly a significant increase in life satisfaction compared to the

control group in the group that trained curiosity, gratitude, optimism, humor and enthusiasm. Compared to before they began the exercises, however, both groups benefited from the strength training. "Anyone who trained one or more strengths reported an increase in their sense of wellbeing," concludes Willibald Ruch, a professor of personality psychology and diagnostics. "This manifested itself in the fact that these participants were more cheerful or more often in a good mood, for instance." The third finding was that people who learned to control their actions and feelings more effectively during the training period and developed more enthusiasm benefited most from the training.

The exercises consisted of activities that the test subjects could easily incorporate into their daily routine. For example, they practiced gratitude by writing a thank-you letter to someone who had played an important role in their lives and trained their appreciation of beauty by paying attention to moments and situations in which they felt admiration for something beautiful. This could be anything from people and things they liked to special abilities and talents of fellow human beings or moving gestures and actions.

## **Positive psychology and character strengths**

Character strengths and their connection with [wellbeing](#) is an important research field in positive psychology. In recent years, a new direction has established itself under this umbrella that mainly focuses on researching positive traits and is aimed at discovering what makes life most worth living – what constitutes [life satisfaction](#), in other words. Positive psychology therefore focuses on topics that have long been neglected by psychology.

**More information:** René T. Proyer, Willibald Ruch and Claudia Buschor. Testing strengths-based interventions: A preliminary study on the effectiveness of a program targeting curiosity, gratitude, hope,

humor, and zest for enhancing life satisfaction. *Journal of Happiness Studies* (in press). [doi:10.1007/s10902-012-9331-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-012-9331-9)

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