

# POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

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Ready for a tour of some of the best work in positive psychology? Read this book, and most important, use your zest and hope as you do the practical activities and curiously reflect on the questions. The more you personalize the material in each chapter, the more benefit you are likely to experience for your wellbeing and resilience!

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An indispensable resource for healthcare professionals. Informative, engaging, thoroughly researched and refreshingly practical. This book is an injection of hope that revitalises your sense of agency and leaves you feeling empowered.

— Sarah Gregg, Author of *Find Your Flow & Choose Happy*

I once read how a nurse has ‘the opportunity to heal the mind, soul, heart, and body of our patients. They may forget your name but they will never forget how you made them feel’ (Maya Angelou). Positive Psychology helps us be our best selves, and to be our best for others requires feeling our best selves too. What Jan has done by her research and throughout this book has helped find a way to keep our nurses and caregivers at their best so, in turn, they continue to be remembered for the best they make others feel.

— Dr Michelle Y Tytherleigh, C.Psychol.,  
SFHEA, PGCE(LTHE), AFBPS

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# POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

A Toolkit for Improving Wellbeing

BY

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*University of Bolton, UK*

AND

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# CONTENTS

<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	ix
<i>About the Authors</i>	xi
<i>Foreword</i>	xiii
<i>Kevin Gournay</i>	
<i>Quote</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvii
1. Introduction	1
2. Positivity and Optimism	11
3. Character Strengths	19
4. Mindfulness	29
5. Self-Compassion	37
6. Kindness and Compassion	45
7. Gratitude	55
8. Social Connection	63
9. Humour	71
10. Hope	79
11. Resilience	89
12. Flow	97
13. Applications of Positive Psychology: From Surveys to Intentions	109
14. Conclusions	119
<i>References</i>	125
<i>Index</i>	177

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# LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

## TABLES

Table 1.	A Classification of VIA Character Strengths and Virtues	20
Table 2.	Descriptions and Development of Strengths	23
Table 3.	Showing Why Happiness Matters?	111
Table 4.	Showing the Benefits of Forgiveness	112
Table 5.	Showing Pre and Post Scores from the Nursing Associate Positive Psychology Intervention ( $n = 103$ )	116

## FIGURE

Fig. 1.	The I-FLOW Model	102
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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Jan Macfarlane, PhD**, is a Lecturer in Health and Social Care at the University of Bolton. Her specialist area is Positive Psychology, specifically in how it can be utilised to maintain and potentially improve the wellbeing and mental fitness of health care professionals. She has developed a range of programmes that have been delivered to staff and students which have shown how these can be used to help people thrive. She has contributed to a range of journals and her main suite of publications is with the *British Journal of Mental Health Nursing* where she also holds a position on the board. She is a qualified state registered nurse and a mental health nurse whose career in the NHS spanned over 30 years.

**Jerome Carson, PhD**, is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Bolton. He is a qualified Clinical Psychologist and has worked in the National Health Service for 27 years. He came to Bolton in 2012. His main research interests are Positive Psychology, recovery from mental health problems, alcohol addiction, bereavement, and autoethnography. He has published widely with over 300 co-authored papers and book chapters. He is the Editor-in-chief of the journal *Mental Health and Social Inclusion* and the Co-editor of journal *Social Work and Social Sciences Review*. He is the Joint Series Editor of the new Emerald Positive Psychology Book Series.

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# FOREWORD

*Kevin Gournay*

In the first two decades of my experience as a healthcare professional, working in a range of settings, I became used to identifying the problems of the patient. I sometimes recorded my assessments on ‘problem-orientated medical records’. My approach therefore led to formulations about problems and deficits. With the benefit of hindsight, I now see that there was so much about my patients that I missed.

My outlook began to change in the early 1990s, when I was fortunate enough to visit a number of model services in the USA and other countries. It was in Kansas that I encountered a new way of working with those with serious and enduring mental health problems, in a method called ‘The Strengths Model of Case Management’. I had the pleasure of meeting Professor Charlie Rapp, a social worker by background, who was instrumental in disseminating this model into practice (Rapp & Goscha, 2011). I began to see that this approach had enormous benefits in the processes of rehabilitation and recovery, for those with serious and enduring mental health problems – with an emphasis on building on the individual’s strengths, rather than focussing on deficits. In turn, this approach required the professional and the service user to engage in a relationship of equals, rather than the service user being a passive recipient of treatments targeted on ‘problem areas’.

Reading this book by two of the UK’s leading authorities on Positive Psychology has been an enormous pleasure. The authors have set out, in a very engaging manner, a range of Positive Psychology interventions. In doing so, they have reminded the reader of the need for the professional to recognize that they need to be kind to themselves, so they can be kind to others. The book also reinforces my long-held belief that humour should play an important part in all of our lives and perhaps needs to be utilised more in professional interactions.

The book does not forget the evidence that underpins the effectiveness of a Positive Psychology approach and serves as a contribution to an area that is being increasingly recognised.

I found reading this book to be an excellent antidote to the reading of soulless scientific papers that appear to summarise human experiences in tables of data. This is not to say that data are unimportant. However, I can see no reason why data cannot be set out in juxtaposition to personal accounts. Thus, we have a reminder that we should never forget that we are all human beings with human needs; all equal beneath the ‘vener of the camouflage’ we all wear.

Back to my experience in Kansas, there I learned that everyone has the potential, or to put it another way, a set of strengths on which to build. However, such strengths may be dormant and may require a process of searching. This book is indeed a ‘toolkit’. First, the book assists the reader to identify potential and then, via Positive Psychology interventions, to begin the process of building.

Professor Kevin Gournay, CBE.

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## QUOTE

*‘The majority of us lead quiet, unheralded lives as we pass through this world. There will most likely be no ticker-tape parades for us, no monuments created in our honour. But that does not lessen our possible impact, for there are scores of people waiting for someone just like us to come along; people who will appreciate our compassion, our unique talents. Someone who will live a happier life merely because we took the time to share what we had to give. Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have a potential to turn a life around. It’s overwhelming to consider the continuous opportunities there are to make our love felt’.*

*Leo Buscaglia.*

(Living, loving & learning by Leo F. Buscaglia, 1982, Fawcett Columbine edition, in English – 1st Ballantine Books Trade Edition: April 1983.)

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*'I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood'.*

**Audre Lorde** ('The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action'. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, pp. 40–44. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984.)

## **Jan Macfarlane**

This book has enabled me to use my top three signature character strengths of *perseverance, love of learning, and love*. Perseverance in overcoming obstacles and committing no matter what came my way, love of learning in a topic I never tire of, and love of others who were a distinctive and necessary part of the process of creating this work.

Therefore, firstly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Jerome Carson, my colleague and mentor during this development of this work. His positivity, humour, gentleness, and zest in the completion of this book never wavered. His certainty and conviction of my success remained steadfast throughout. His guidance has had a significant impact in my professional and personal development. He has been inspirational throughout and was able to help me flourish and use my individual style and strengths.

Whilst the academic and professional support has played an important role, it would have not been possible for me to complete this work without the support, encouragement, empathy, patience, listening, dog walking, and tea-making skills of my husband Peter Macfarlane. The dulcet Lancashire tones of 'Are you going to do some of your book work now?', when I really did not want to, ensured I kept on track right to the very end. I am also thankful to my two daughters, Freya and Rhianna Macfarlane, who always believed I could, even when I did not. And loved me more when I thought I could not, which was more important.

Finally, my love goes to Merlin and Nellie who ensured I stopped to take breath, moved from the computer and books and take pleasure in the awesome nature of the seasons, which helped me reflect, process, and put things in perspective. Or as they might say, just be more dog!

### Jerome Carson

It has been a pleasure to work with Jan on this book. She has of course written the bulk of it. She is an inspiration to nurses everywhere. She has been awarded her PhD towards the end of her nursing career, yet her desire to keep studying and writing has never been stronger. But for me there is only one person that I would like to dedicate this book to. It is my sister Michele Foster. While I was sorry for myself having had to isolate on my own during the first COVID-19 Lockdown, as I was clinically vulnerable, she messaged me, *'Don't count the days JC. Make the days count!'* I aim to make the days counts for as long as there is air in my lungs Michele! You have taught all your siblings to seize the moment. Carpe diem.

The authors would like to thank Mark Allen Publishing, who publish the *British Journal of Mental Health Nursing* for their permission to use some of the materials for the book from the following suite of published commissioned papers on positive psychology. We are also grateful to the editor of the journal Vicki Williams for commissioning all of the papers listed below.

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## INTRODUCTION

*The aim of Positive Psychology is to catalyse a change in psychology from a preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building the best qualities in life...The very good news is there are quite a number of internal circumstances under your voluntary control. If you decide to change them (and be warned that none of these changes come without real effort), your level of happiness is likely to increase lastingly.*

*Martin Seligman (2002b, p. 3)*

This book aims to give readers an overview of the principles and practices of contemporary positive psychology. It is written for the practitioner whatever their profession but will relate to workers in the healthcare field. It demonstrates how theories, concepts and up-to-date evidence derived from positive psychology research can provide a beneficial source to help guide you in this relatively new field of practice which you may not have found in other textbooks, training courses or continuing professional development pathways. The content and the practical activities enclosed within the chapters are particularly transferable and user-friendly and are written without requiring extra supervision.

This book cannot contain everything related to Positive Psychology as this would be unrealistic and needs to be subject to the practicalities of publication. However, it will provide an opening for healthcare workers to contemplate how to dovetail the principles of positive psychology to maintain their flourishing and hopefully stimulate interest in developing further knowledge of the subject. This will be a theme throughout the chapters, to enable you to

relate it to your clinical practice and help close the science-practice gap, by making connections to the beneficial links between improved mental health and wellbeing.

The information included is appropriate for individuals who are new to the topic but also allows for multifaceted investigation with further appraisal and experiential use of the activities. Reading directly from the printed text does not suit everyone's learning style. Therefore, this book contains a range of active opportunities to help foster inclusivity, promote independent understanding and provide practical learning activities. This is provided by:

- clear introductions and summaries;
- links to healthcare practice;
- reflective points;
- addition of critical thinking information;
- outlining of key statements;
- extended research links via a range of secondary sources and web links;
- each chapter is backed up by up-to-date references.

## PERSONAL HISTORY

Jan

My awareness of positive psychology began in the late 1970s and 1980s, although I did not know it at the time, having neither the knowledge nor the vocabulary to conceptualise it as a specialist area. As a qualified registered general nurse and mental health nurse, the medical model (Engel, 1977) dominated the approach to care. People were viewed as patients who were there to be treated and who often assumed a degree of passivity. It followed that reduced consideration was applied to their abilities and sense of agency. It seemed to me that this was replicated when assessing students, when I later began lecturing in higher education, specialising in the healthcare sector. Despite their positive characteristics being outlined in references, the overall indicator of student success was measured by their grades. I acknowledged this approach worked for education but pondered if there could be a corresponding appraisal assessment that provided a more holistic commendation. This could then assist learners to be justly self-aware

of their range of strengths and abilities and could help them develop their potential to advance further.

My current post as a university lecturer introduced me to the Positive Psychology team, where I was able to develop understanding and debate matters arising in contemporary practice. This cemented the decision that Applied Positive Psychology was going to be the topic of my PhD. Throughout this time, I was conscious of my own experiences as a learner and practitioner and often called on theory and practical interventions to support me during challenging times. It resonates still as I continue to develop in this field. I have now been successful in developing a six-week Positive Psychology Course for healthcare professionals, designed an innovative related I-FLOW model, constructed, and delivered a Level 5 module on Health and Applied Positive Psychology Interventions. I have been able to share and support practitioners by adding to the developing body of knowledge through a suite of publications published in the British *Journal of Mental Health Nursing*.

Hence, this book reflects part of my life goal to embed versatile positive psychology interventions and principles in higher education and healthcare settings, to continue to enlighten practitioners on how they can enhance inclusion in their classrooms, as well as clinical practice, and to ultimately flourish as human beings. It can also be aligned with various professional standards. For instance, the Standards of Proficiency for Registered Nurses (NMC, 2018a). *Platform 1* states: Being an accountable professional in demonstrating an understanding of research methods to practice safely and promote good practice by thinking critically when applying evidence. It also connects to the Nurse's Code of Conduct *Section 6*, on practising effectively on the best available evidence (NMC, 2018b).

Jerome

As part of my PhD, I developed an intervention to enhance staff self-esteem (Carson, 2006). I was already drawing on elements of positive psychology then, though, like Jan, I was unaware of it. I discovered tools like *Strengths-finder*. It was around 2006 that I started noticing the field and began to use techniques such as the VIA Strengths Test in my practice as a clinical psychologist. In 2008, I gave a paper at an internal conference of clinical psychologists at the Maudsley Hospital in South London, and I wondered if Positive Psychology might not just be snake oil. I could see huge benefits for you the reader of this book, but I was unsure if it would truly benefit many of

the people, I worked with, who had long-term mental health problems. The arrival of a new PhD student in 2013, Chathurika Kannangara, and the enthusiasm of psychology student, Rachel Taylor, eventually led Chathurika and me to set up an MSc in Positive Psychology at the University of Bolton. A few years later, Chathurika developed an even more successful MSc in Counselling and Positive Psychology. At the same time, I was supervising several doctoral students in areas where we might apply Positive Psychology, such as obesity, dual diagnosis, compassion, and Jan's research with nursing associates. I was also privileged to meet Professor Martin Seligman in Sri Lanka, and we were able to invite Professor Samuel Ho to Bolton for a week of Positive Psychology teaching sessions and a mini-conference. It is now one of my major research interests.

#### WHAT ARE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY INTERVENTIONS?

Parks and Titova (2016) describe positive psychology interventions as validated techniques developed to boost flourishing. There are many examples to be found in the literature, yet for this book, the focus will be on those that are the most reliable and effective through research-based evidence. They are user-friendly, free and contribute to increased self-awareness. Townsley, Wang, Katta, Townsley, and Li-Wang's (2023) systematic review of positive psychology interventions used to improve healthcare workers' wellbeing, concluded they were beneficial. However, they do require motivation and a level of energy to act on the theory, which cannot be underestimated. Understandably, the most effective results are those found when the learner decides which activities are the best fit for them to include in their everyday lives (Titova, Werner, & Sheldon, 2018). The individual can manage their thoughts, actions and behaviours. Consequently, developing healthy behaviours empowers staff and helps them mitigate the lack of control and frustration often felt by external factors. You, the individual reader, will bring your ideas and experiences to this book and be able to tailor the content through your own choices as to what would be the best fit for you. Today, we have increased health literacy about maintaining and improving our wellbeing, but we do not always understand when or how to act. We can often just tolerate our situation or be in survival mode and not be aware of the choices and options we have, to regain our creativity and become inspired. We cannot always change the system, but we have the agency in deciding if and how we can change it.

## ACTIVITY

Fold a piece of paper in half to make two columns. At the top of one column write ‘Things I can control’, and on the other, ‘Things I cannot control’. This helps sort out the mental static and clutter that can impair our delusion of control and where our energies are directed successfully or not. Now pause and prioritise which aspects are worth investing in and which are no longer useful for you. Reflect on how acting on this different perspective can enrich you going forward. The following chapters may give you some direction.

## STRUCTURE

The book is constructed as a succession of chapters that form a thorough understanding of positive psychology, but they can also be read as individual topics.

The book naturally commences with an overview and context of the subject in Chapters 1 and 2. It draws heavily on the ideas of the American psychologist Martin Seligman, as he has arguably been the most influential figure in Positive Psychology. Character Strengths are accepted as being the backbone of Positive Psychology, which merits their inclusion in the next chapter. Ryan Niemiec, another American psychologist, was the first academic to merge Character Strengths and Mindfulness, which makes for a smooth link into Chapter 4. As a rule, self-compassion is not always given priority in the caring professions. It is, however, essential to improve quality of life and is fully deserving of inclusion in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 begins to bring positive psychology interventions into the workplace. It highlights how kindness is essential and helps us connect with others. Gratitude is one of the most effective positive psychology interventions, which made it an obvious choice for Chapter 7. Chapter 8 outlines the importance of social connection as a core psychological need. This is followed by humour as an essential part of the healthcare practitioner’s toolkit, as explored in Chapter 9. The perennial topic of hope, which is the essence of the caring professional, features in Chapter 10. Chapter 11 summarises the interventions to investigate the importance of selecting interventions that are most natural to use to increase personal resilience. Chapter 12 delves into the concept of flow and introduces the I-FLOW model (Macfarlane, 2021b), which helps readers recognise that psychological balance requires committed time and effort allowing us to use our natural skills and strengths to take action to increase flourishing and reduce other traits that lead to languishing. Chapter 13 reports on

research evidence as to the importance and effectiveness of Positive Psychology domains as well as Interventions (PPI). Chapter 14 provides a conclusion so you can achieve a holistic overview of the main applied positive psychology interventions in healthcare.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter will explore the significance of positive psychology for the well-being of the healthcare professional. It will give a rationale for the development of this book from the perspective of the authors. It outlines a variety of research-based positive psychology interventions that encourage healthcare professionals to transfer their knowledge through positive psychology theory into real-life action.

## CHAPTER 2. POSITIVITY AND OPTIMISM

This second chapter provides a historical lens on positive psychology. It further explains its relevance for healthcare professionals and how positive psychology interventions can be used to help inspire positive thinking and foster new skills via neuroplasticity.

## CHAPTER 3. CHARACTER STRENGTHS

This chapter will focus on character strengths and how they are relevant to healthcare practitioners. It explains key terms and how they are a natural link in helping us demonstrate and balance our authenticity and natural capacity through mindful actions. We are not often aware of our strengths, therefore, identifying them and confidently demonstrating them has the potential to be the key to you finding harmony and ‘happiness’ at work and in life.

## CHAPTER 4. MINDFULNESS

This chapter will focus on the development and relevance of mindfulness for healthcare professionals to help them become more self-aware and recognise how this can help connect to a holistic approach to mind and body.

## CHAPTER 5. SELF-COMPASSION

This chapter will focus on developing self-compassion as a follow-on from mindfulness. It explores how being kind to yourself, being aware of negative feelings and realising everyone experiences them at some time, help us to prioritise ourselves meaningfully. It is not often we prioritise ourselves but it is important to provide effective care. This may take the form of tenderness or the need to take definite action to support others.

## CHAPTER 6. KINDNESS AND COMPASSION

This chapter focusses on the difference between kindness and compassion. It illustrates how and when we can carry out more acts of kindness to others and how we experience the linked benefits ourselves.

## CHAPTER 7. GRATITUDE

This chapter will focus on gratitude. Gratitude is an influential positive psychology intervention, and there are neurological changes when it is practised and applied. It is also a complex concept when attempting to define it, which adds to its fascination in healthcare use.

## CHAPTER 8. SOCIAL CONNECTION

This chapter focusses on how to increase effective social connectivity as it is fundamental to our clinical existence. It is the main tenet of our work in practice with colleagues and clients. We can be influential in improving our wellbeing and that of others through further developed understanding.

## CHAPTER 9. HUMOUR

This chapter follows the application of humour within the care context. It is an established part of the healthcare arena and is regarded as fundamental. Experiential exercises will help you increase your awareness and appreciation of the style of humour you use and consider how you can include it within your everyday life.

## CHAPTER 10. HOPE

This chapter focusses on the concept of hope. It is accepted that hope develops in individuals through their life experiences and how this helps them reframe their future. Hope aims to improve wellbeing and constructing a healthy future.

## CHAPTER 11. RESILIENCE

This chapter explains how resilience is entrenched in the practice of positive psychological interventions. Resilience has become a topic in present-day discussion as it entices us with new possibilities in our ever-changing worlds. Healthcare professionals need to develop and maintain high levels of resilience to function and thrive in their clinical arenas.

## CHAPTER 12. FLOW

This chapter explores the process of flow, and how this working towards a balance and connectedness of mind and body assists healthcare practitioners in increasing their resilience. It accepts that wellbeing is successfully navigating positive and negative feelings, thoughts and behaviours and that using our strengths is crucial.

## CHAPTER 13. APPLICATIONS OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: FROM SURVEYS TO INTENTIONS

This chapter gives an overview of the rationale for the selection of the various topics. The topics chosen for this book have been selected for their reliability and validity. Many other areas could have been included, such as creativity, physical activity, wisdom and spirituality, but for brevity and meeting word limits, they have not been included in this volume. This section looks at three research studies that have explored happiness, forgiveness and the benefits of using multi-component positive psychology interventions.

## CHAPTER 14. CONCLUSION

This concluding chapter reminds you of the 11 discrete and motivational topics that have been presented in Chapters 2–13. The importance of these has