

# Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Course: Finding the Positive

Level: High School



**Objective:** Students will understand the concept of positive thinking. Students will be able to identify the definition of positive psychology. Students will practice exercises to increase positivity.




**Course Intent:** In this module, students will gain an understanding of and define positive psychology, work together to combat negative thoughts, learn exercises through which they can practice positive thinking, and implement those exercises in their daily routines.

## Applications & Benefits:

Positive thinking improves students' mental and physical health. Positivity reduces the likelihood of depression and leads to improved attention, performance, and behavior in school. These qualities facilitate learning and provide teachers with a more effective classroom environment.

## Course Snapshot

This lesson incorporates the following activities, information and Teacher Tools.

LESSONS	ACTIVITY	TIME REQUIRED	RESOURCES & MATERIALS NEEDED
 <b>Activity #1</b> What is Positive Psychology?	Discussion Brainstorming Session	5 – 10 minutes	About Positive Psychology Student Instructions Activity Definitions White board and expo markers Teacher Tool: The Hippocampus
 <b>Activity #2:</b> Exercising Gratitude	Journaling Discussion	10 minutes	About Positive Psychology Student Instructions Activity Definitions Student Journals, notebook paper, or Teacher Tool: Journaling for Gratitude
 <b>Activity #3:</b> Learning From Your Mistakes	Journaling Discussion	5 – 10 minutes	About Positive Psychology Student Instructions Activity Definitions Journal or Notebook paper (from Activity 2)

# About Positive Psychology

## Defining Positive Psychology

### **What is positivity?**

*Positivity is the ability to think with an attitude of optimism, focusing on what brings joy and being hopeful about the future.*

### **What is positive psychology?**

*Positive psychology is a fairly new branch of psychology, founded by psychologist Martin Seligman in the late 1990s. Positive psychology focuses on the what makes individuals want to have happy, meaningful and fulfilling lives. Positive psychology is not simply having a positive attitude. Positive psychology recognizes the numerous benefits to positive thinking, but also recognizes that some situations require realistic thinking. It is a preventative type of psychology, and not a reactive one. This means that it focuses on improving one's happiness before mental health problems like depression develop.*



### **Module Rationale:**

Research has shown that positive thinking improves the mental and physical health of students. Students who rely on negative thinking are distracted by everyday problems, which results in less attention to and retention of school content. It can be difficult for teachers to help these students. On the other hand, students who focus on positive thinking show increased attention and performance in school. Science supports this conclusion; brain scans show a more active hippocampus, the brain area responsible for learning and memory, in positive students.

Positivity has also been associated with lower rates of depression. Students who can find the positive in an ocean of negativity have greater resilience than students who ruminate only on the negative. High levels of resilience help prevent depressive symptoms. Preventing depression is important for both the individual student and the classroom environment.



Positivity can also improve the physical health of students. Studies have found lower blood pressure, healthier levels of blood sugar, and less likelihood of heart disease in positive individuals. Positive thinking has also been linked to immunity. In effect, students exhibiting positive thinking will most likely take fewer sick days from school than negative thinking students. This is an important predictor of student performance, since higher attendance often results in higher GPA.

The goal of this module is to provide students with exercises to increase positive thinking. This module aims to introduce students to a routine of positivity. Eventually, students will automatically seek out the positive in many difficult situations. This has the potential to result in overall better performance and learning.

## Feedback to Students

Remind students that positive thinking can be taught. It is common for students to believe that some of us are born naturally optimistic and some of us naturally pessimistic. Acknowledge that while this may be true about our natural dispositions, positivity is also a learned skill. Tell students to be patient with themselves. You can remind them that positive psychology is a relatively new concept that everyone struggles with, including adults. All better performance and learning.

### BLOCK OUT Negative thoughts



### Helpful Tips

- Some students are naturally more optimistic than others. Be patient with students who have a harder time grasping the concept of positive thinking. Be ready to repeat definitions and explanations more than once.
- If students are having a difficult time connecting with the material, model some simple everyday examples of positivity in your life. Some examples include the weather, receiving a compliment, or something that made you laugh.

## Activity #1: What is Positive Psychology?

### Teacher Instructions

Carefully read pages 2 and 3 that describe the basics of positive psychology. Make the Student Instructions for Activity #1 and the images for The Hippocampus accessible for students (via projector, hand copies, online host, etc.).



#### What is positivity?

*Positivity is the ability to think with an attitude of optimism, focusing on what brings joy and being hopeful about the future.*



#### What is positive psychology?

*Positive psychology is a fairly new branch of psychology, founded by psychologist Martin Seligman in the late 1990s. Positive psychology focuses on the what makes individuals want to have happy, meaningful and fulfilling lives. Positive psychology is not simply having a positive attitude. Positive psychology recognizes the numerous benefits to positive thinking, but also recognizes that some situations require realistic thinking. It is a preventative type of psychology, and not a reactive one. This means that it focuses on improving one's happiness before mental health problems like depression develop.*

## **Activity:**

Assess students' previous knowledge of positive thinking. Create a mind-map by writing the word "positive" in the center of the classroom white board. Ask students to volunteer any words or activities that they associate with the word "positive." Try to get participation from all areas of the room and avoid calling on the same students.

After five minutes, or until the students run out of ideas, discuss with students the definition of positivity as presented in this lesson plan. Explain to them what positive psychology is and how it is different from other kinds of psychology. If time allows, ask students to share their opinions on this science (see images of The Hippocampus). In a recent study published in Psychological Science in 2018, researchers found that increased hippocampus function was linked to positive attitudes about math among elementary students. Ask students to share examples of how they implement positivity in their lives. Allow students to ask questions at any point. something unique or special about them. Ask students to share about family traditions, if they practice religion, places they've lived, languages are spoken at home, family members they live with, and more.

## Activity #2: Exercising Gratitude

### Teacher Instructions

Carefully read pages 2 and 3 that describe the basics of positive psychology. Make the Student Instructions for Activity #1 accessible for students (via projector, hand copies, online host, etc.).

Prior to the day when you plan to carry out this lesson plan, tell students to bring a notebook or journal if they have one. If a student is unable to afford this, reassure them that that is not a problem. You can provide them with a small composition notebook, they can use notebook paper for journaling, or you can make copies of the provided Teacher Tool: Journaling for Gratitude.

### Definitions

#### **What is gratitude? Why is it important to practice it?**

*Gratitude is the ability to be thankful for what life brings us. It is important to be just as grateful for the small pleasures as we are for the big ones. Although gratitude is a natural characteristic of humans, it can be easy to neglect it. We are often more focused on what we want in life than on what we already have. Fortunately, daily practice can greatly increase our feelings of gratitude. Gratitude can help us find the positive when we are surrounded by negative thoughts. This can lead to improvements in our overall happiness.*



## Activity

Tell students to get out their journals or notebooks. Likewise, you can make copies of the Teacher Tool: Journaling for Gratitude and provide to students that do not have a journal. On the first page of the journal, tell them to write the word “gratitude.” Discuss with students the definition and importance of gratitude. Tell them to write the definition, created individually or as a class, next to the word. Remind students to ask questions if they do not understand the concept or if they need clarification.

After every student has written and understood the definition of gratitude, tell them that they will use the journal as an exercise to be more grateful.

The activity will involve a mixture of normal journaling and gratitude journaling. Explain to them that they will have 8 minutes of total journaling time. Tell students to draw a line down the middle of the page. On the left side, tell them to write the word “journaling.”

Set a timer for four minutes. Tell students to write down a stream of consciousness of their thoughts on the side they labeled “journaling.” This can include things that happened during their day, what they are worried about, or anything that crosses their mind. Remind them that what they write will not be shared with the class or with the teacher. This will encourage them to be open in their writing.

When the timer goes off, tell students to stop writing. Tell them to write the word “gratitude” on the right-hand side of the page.

Once again, set a timer for four minutes. Tell students to reread their journaling and count how many negative thoughts they wrote about. For every negative thought, tell them to write one thing they are grateful for. Explain to them that what they are grateful for does not have to be related to the negative thoughts they wrote about.

For the remainder of the activity, ask students how they felt while journaling and then journaling for gratitude. Ask them what was challenging and what was easy. Do not ask students to share what they wrote. This will only cause students to hold back on their writing. Lead a discussion on how this relates to positivity.

Remind students of the importance of this activity. Tell them they should do it as often as possible, preferably on a daily basis. You can set aside five minutes at the beginning of class each day or once a week for students to do this. If you ask students to journal at home, remember not to ask them to turn the journal in for an assignment grade. What the students wrote is personal and it should not be a requirement to share it. However, assure them that they are welcome to share it with you after class if they want to.

## Activity #3: Learning From Your Mistakes

### Teacher Instructions

Carefully read pages 2 and 3 that describe the basics of positive psychology. Make the Student Instructions for Activity #1 accessible for students (via projector, hand copies, online host, etc).

Make sure students have access to their journals from the Exercising Gratitude activity, or a clean sheet of notebook paper.



### Helpful Tips

This activity requires students to think about previous mistakes they made. Some memories might trigger negative emotions like sadness or anxiety. You must be patient with students and reassure them that those are common responses. Tell students that if a memory is making them uncomfortable, they can move on to another mistake.

### Definitions

#### Why is it important to learn from our mistakes?

*Mistakes are often the memories students hold onto the most. Students focus on what they did wrong and feel shame or regret. It is important to turn that shame and regret into more constructive emotions. When we learn from our mistakes, we realize that even the worst moments can be helpful to us.*

## Activity

Explain to students the importance of learning from our mistakes. Use the information above as guidance.

Tell students to get out the journal or notebook they used for the “Exercising Gratitude” activity. On another page of the journal, tell them to write the title of this activity: “Learning from our Mistakes.”

Set a timer for two minutes. During that time, tell your students to come up with two or three mistakes they made in their lifetime. These can be big or small mistakes. Students should write the mistakes down on their journal. Once the timer is over, tell the students to stop writing.

Set the timer for another two minutes. During that time, tell the students to write one or two things they learned from each mistake. If a student is having trouble coming up with a positive result of each mistake, ask them to think about what would be different if he had not made that mistake. Make sure you guide them towards positive thinking.

After the two minutes are over, tell students to stop writing. Transition into discussion time. Ask students how they felt during the activity. Was this your first time doing this? What were some of the challenges that you encountered? How do you feel after completing the activity? Feel free to ask students to share what they wrote down, but do not force them to do so. Students might have written personal events that they are not comfortable with sharing.

Encourage students to do this activity every time they have feelings of regret and shame because of a mistake. Assure them that they can share with you what they wrote, but that they are not required to do so.



# Student Instructions

## Activity #1: What is Positive Psychology?

### **Brainstorm**

What comes to mind when you think of the word 'positive'?

### **Define**

#### **What is positivity?**

*Positivity is the ability to think with an attitude of optimism, focusing on what brings joy and being hopeful about the future.*

#### **What is positive psychology?**

*Positive psychology focuses on the what makes individuals want to have happy, meaningful and fulfilling lives. Positive psychology is not simply having a positive attitude. Positive psychology recognizes the numerous benefits to positive thinking, but also recognizes that some situations require realistic thinking. It is a preventative type of psychology, and not a reactive one. This means that it focuses on improving one's happiness before mental health problems like depression develop.*

### **Take a Look**

Researchers found that a positive attitude toward math in elementary aged children was associated with more activity in the hippocampus, which is the part of your brain linked to memory and learning.

Can you find the hippocampus in the photo of the brain scan?

### **Discuss**

How do you implement positivity in your life?

### **Fascinating Details**

Positive thinking has been shown to improve the health of terminally ill patients. Researchers agree that it is just as important to focus on administering mental health treatment to cancer patients as it is to administer physical treatment. In other words, positivity has a direct effect on our physical health!



# The Hippocampus

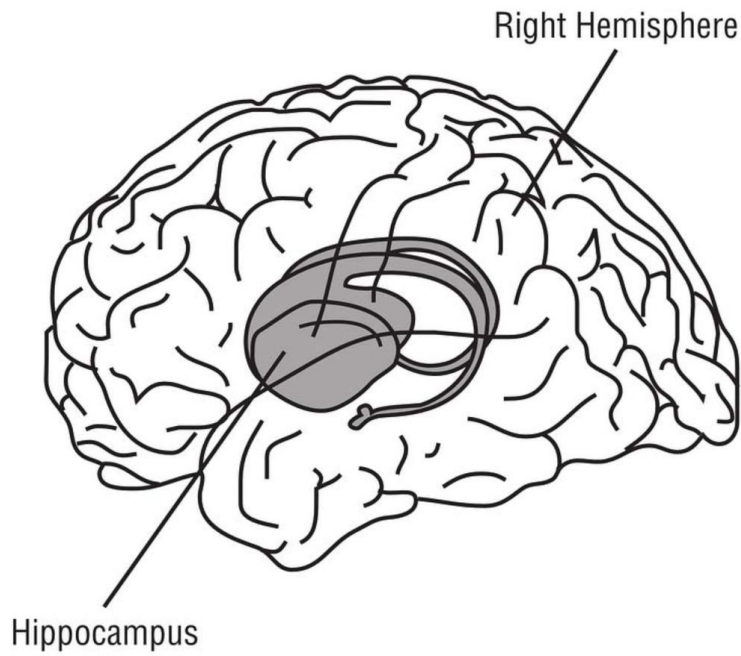


Image: "my brains - let me show you them" by Liz Henry is licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0

# Student Instructions

## Activity #2:

### Exercising Gratitude

#### **Define**

What is gratitude?

Why is it important to practice it gratitude?

#### **Journal Your Thoughts**

On the right side of your paper, write and journal about whatever you may like. Write about anything that crosses your mind, perhaps about your day, something you are worried about, something you are excited about.

#### **Journal for Gratitude**

Reread your journaling and make note of any negative thoughts. On the left side of your paper, write things they you are grateful for. These can be connected to the negative thoughts you wrote or not.

#### **Discuss**

How does feeling grateful improve positivity?

#### **Apply**

It is a good idea to journal about or simply focus on gratitude. Practice this daily!



*“Positive people don’t just have a good day; they make it a good day. People who think positively usually see endless possibilities.” – Richard Branson*

## Journaling for Gratitude

What is gratitude?

What is gratitude?

What is gratitude?

# Student Instructions

## Activity #3: Learning From Your Mistakes

### Engage

#### **Why is it important to learn from our mistakes?**

Mistakes are often the memories students hold onto the most. Students focus on what they did wrong and feel shame or regret. It is important to turn that shame and regret into more constructive emotions. When we learn from our mistakes, we realize that even the worst moments can be helpful to us.

### Recall

What are some mistakes you have made? Write two or three in your journal or on your paper.

### Reflect

What did you learn from making these mistakes? Write down your learned lessons.  
What is a positive change you made because of the mistake?

### Share

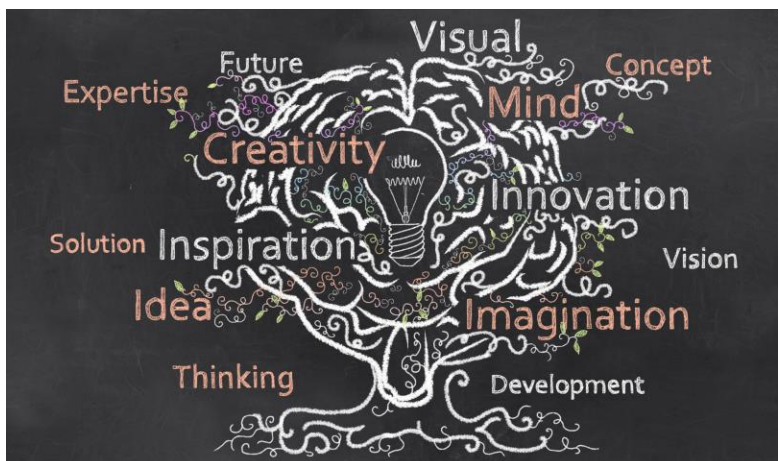
Was this the first time you've thought about learning from your mistakes? What were some of the challenges that you encountered? How do you feel after completing this activity?

### Apply

If you are experiencing feelings of negativity because of a mistake, remember to focus on what you learned from the experience. Turn your negative thoughts to positive ones for the future. Practice writing down your thoughts on a regular basis.

### **Fascinating Details**

The human brain is born with very few capabilities, but a tremendous amount of potential for growth. With everything you do, your brain is taking in information, making sense of it, and solving problems. Mental effort and intellectual difficulty require the brain to establish new neural connections. The brain physically grows stronger and more intelligent when it is challenged. Even if it does not feel like you've accomplished everything you were attempting to learn, your brain has grown stronger.



## Quick Quiz

### 1. What does positive psychology focus on?

- a. It focuses on curing mental illnesses.
- b. It focuses on what makes life worth living.
- c. It focuses on being present in the moment.
- d. It focuses on the problems we have each day.

### 2. Which of the following is a characteristic of gratitude?

- a. It cannot be learned.
- b. It is time-consuming.
- c. It requires practice.
- d. It is unrelated to joy.

### 3. Why should we try to learn from our mistakes?

- a. It helps relieve us of shame.
- b. It helps us to think positively.
- c. It makes us more appreciative.
- d. All of the above.

### Teacher Feedback

Please provide insights on any adjustments made regarding the actual use of the content above.  
Feel free to share your thoughts, suggestions, constructive criticism.  
Email your feedback to: [info@mylearningtools.org](mailto:info@mylearningtools.org)