

In A Nutshell's Guide™

**SUCCESS
WITH
POSITIVE
PSYCHOLOGY**

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IN A NUTSHELL GUIDE: SUCCESS WITH POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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PDF Edition

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Contents

[One: Pollyanna Hypothesis and Positive Psychology](#)

[Two: Default State of Mind and Role of Optimism](#)

[Three: State of “Flow,” Optimism, and Positivity Ratio](#)

[Four: Coaching Yourself with Principles from Positive Psychology](#)

[References](#)

[About the Author](#)

One: Pollyanna Hypothesis and Positive Psychology

In this guide, we will be discussing the significance of understanding and applying the Pollyanna hypothesis, optimism, the pillars of Positive Psychology, the “flow” state of mind, optimalism, 3-to-1 positivity ratio, and coaching with Positive Psychology framework to achieve lasting happiness and success. By “lasting happiness” it refers to a genuine state of homeostasis in which a feeling of contentment is present without a need for intoxicating temporary state of euphoria. By “success” it refers to a state of homeostasis in which a sense of security for fulfillment of immediate and long-term necessities is present. Both feelings of lasting happiness and success are crucial in achieving a balanced life with contentment, which is the ultimate destination.

These approaches have been proven scientifically and should be adapted for your particular circumstances in order to make the most of them. Like any other guidance, knowing and understanding would mean little if these approaches aren’t properly applied. Try them and be pleasantly surprised that happiness and success come from how we control information that enters our mind and the perspective with which we see the world and ourselves.

And you are in the driver’s seat. Enjoy the ride.

First things first, should we be Pollyannas or not? The popular premise is: Those who think positively are likely to succeed faster and live with better quality. So, does it mean you should only see the “good” side of everything, without considering the “bad” sides at all? Well, it is not recommended and most of us would prefer not being Pollyannas, but the *Pollyanna hypothesis has been examined scientifically and it does make a difference in our quality of life.*

Researchers Marty Zusman of Indiana University Northwest, David Knox of East Carolina University, and Michelle Lieberman of East Carolina University (2005) concluded that the Pollyanna hypothesis does affect the female students, which is reflected in their doing better than male counterparts in college. So powerful an optimistic view is that if a girl did graduate from high school, she is likely to succeed in college as well. In this study, the hypothesis that “a rewarding equitable future awaits the achieving woman” has proven to be true, which is an indication of how far women’s perception of selves has improved from 50 years ago. An optimistic view shapes one’s behaviors to act according to the belief of “success awaits.” However, we should not succumb to the so-called “tyrannies of optimism” (Seligman, 1991), which can be quite tempting. There is time to be optimistic, there is time to be realistic. We just need to be able to discern them.

Now let’s move to Positive Psychology. It is far more encompassing than the Pollyanna hypothesis. It is a whole new field of psychology complementing the pathology-based other schools of psychology. This movement to learn more about our positive traits in light of improving our lives started in 1998 by Martin Seligman, PhD and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, PhD. Seligman is leading the first Master’s degree program in Positive Psychology at the

University of Pennsylvania and Csikszentmihalyi the first doctoral program at Claremont Graduate University.

In general, the study of psychology can be defined as the scientific approach used to understand mental processes and behaviors. It primarily deals with mental illnesses and disorders, such as depression, phobia, and addiction. In short, psychology has been synonymous with the “dark side” of human existence (Snyder & McCullough, 2000). Positive Psychology complements such view, because considering both sides of the human psyche would provide a more complete view. Psychotherapists use various therapeutic models and interventions to treat disorders. The premise is: When there is a problem with one’s psychology, there are ways to fix it. So far, psychotherapists have been successful in treating fourteen and curing two illnesses (Seligman, 2002).

Positive Psychology is not about feeling happy-go-lucky or selectively focusing on the good side of everything. However, Positive Psychology offers something that has been neglected by other schools of psychology: *Optimizing one’s mental function to better people’s lives*. One criticism on Positive Psychology comes from the “recovery movement” that posits Positive Psychology’s distancing from pathology model is a fallacy because of two reasons (Resnick & Rosenheck, 2006). First, Positive Psychology is also useful in recovery from mental illnesses. Second, “pathology” itself is not a synonym for “weakened and damaged.” Here, we are not going into details on the reasons why Positive Psychology is useful for recovery from mental and physiological illnesses. Instead, we will discuss the self-coaching approaches using Positive Psychology framework in the following sections.

Positive motivation is an important factor in fostering one’s optimized self. Martin Seligman in *Authentic Happiness* (2002) said, “There is not a shred of evidence that strength and virtue are derived from negative motivation. I believe that evolution has favored good and bad traits, and any number of adaptive roles in the world have selected for morality, cooperation, altruism, and goodness, just as any number have also selected for murder, theft, self-seeking, and terrorism.” Positive Psychology further explores this paradigm with its three pillars: the study of positive emotions, the study of positive traits, and the study of positive institutions. Having all these three creates a strong basis for positivity, thus increases the degree of happiness, which is an element of success.

Now let’s discuss briefly Positive Psychology in relations with the other schools of psychology.

In a nutshell, the traditional field of psychology is divided into five perspectives: behaviorism, psychoanalysis, humanism, cognitive, and neurobiological. Prior to these five views, structuralism (the study of what “mind” is) and functionalism (the study of “what” the mind does and “why”) pioneered the study. Wilhelm Wundt, who was known as the founding father of psychology, was a structuralist. William James, a functionalist, soon followed with publishing the first book on psychology *Principles of Psychology* (1890). This book can be obtained free from various online bookstores or [Project Gutenberg](#) for free.

Behaviorism is a view that focuses on the study of stimulus and response with Pavlov's dog experiment as an important milestone. Ivan Pavlov experimented with simultaneously ringing a bell when giving food to a dog, which he repeated hundreds of times. The dog salivated when it heard the bell, even when the food was not given anymore. This approach is called Classical Conditioning. Other behaviorists to note are John Watson and B.F. Skinner (Corsini & Wedding, 2011).

Sigmund Freud founded psychoanalytic approach, in which it asserted that human behaviors are mostly influenced by unconscious sexual desires and motives. Sigmund Freud's theory of development is divided into five stages of psychosexual development: oral (birth to 1.5 years), anal (1.5 to 3 years), phallic (3 to 6 years), latency (6 to puberty), and genital (puberty onward) (Santrock, 2009). Freud and his colleague Joseph Breuer used hypnotism and free association, in which the patients could talk about anything that came into mind (Corsini & Wedding, 2011). Freudian has become a widely accepted "dogma" in the world of psychotherapy and its influence has shaped disease-based perspective in all other schools of psychology. *Psychotherapists have been working with this framework one way or another, until the emergence of Positive Psychology recently.*

The humanistic perspective focuses on free will in making choices, which is the opposite of deterministic behaviorism and psychoanalytic perspectives. Abraham Maslow pioneered self-actualization in humanistic perspective and Carl Rogers founded client-centered therapy (Corsini & Wedding, 2011). Maslow believed that psychological needs are the highest achievements after other lower-level needs are satisfied. Rogers' client-centered therapy focused on the patient's experiences with the therapist as a facilitator for change. And it was Maslow who coined the term "positive psychology" in his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality* (Siegel, Ince, Allison & Allison, 2009) (Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

The cognitive viewpoint emphasizes the interrelated relationships among perception, language, memory, and problem solving skills. Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky are two important psychologists to note in this field, who studied how our brain processes information that would construct specific emotions, intelligences, and overall experiences (Chomsky, 2006). Jean Piaget believed that active learning is more effective than passive learning (Corsini & Wedding, 2011). Chomsky focused on humans' inborn disposition to learn language and Piaget focused on the stages of cognitive development (Chomsky, 2006). Both Piaget and Chomsky's arguments are in alignment with the premise of constructing positive emotions, traits, and institutions in Positive Psychology. Both scientists provided a scientific base on the importance of positive wordings in maintaining positive moods and positive equilibrium.

In a lengthy volume *Positive Psychology: the Scientific and Practical Explorations of Human Strengths*, C.R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez (2007) defined Positive Psychology as "the scientific and applied approach to uncovering people's strengths and promoting their positive functions." Both Martin E.P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi founded Positive Psychology in 1998. In the same year, Martin E.P. Seligman, the president of American Psychological Association at that time, made a statement that invigorated the development and further research of the field of psychology said, "We need massive research on human strength and virtue. We need practitioners to recognize that much of the best work they do is amplifying

the strengths rather than repairing their patients' weaknesses." Six core virtues that most religions and spiritual codes acknowledge as strengths of humanity, which are crucial in optimizing life, are: Wisdom and knowledge, courage, love and humanity, justice, temperance, and spirituality and transcendence (Seligman, 2002).

Positive Psychology examines individual's neurological, psychological, and physiological elements to support the scientific approaches in optimizing strengths of individuals (Snyder & Lopez, 2007). Major critics have been disagreeing with Positive Psychology due to the alleged fallacy of logical positivism, according to Christopher Peterson in "Positive Psychology" (2009). Critics said that it is not scientific to impose values. *The study of psychology is limited to facts and scientific inquiries, not recommending ethics and values, which is an academic tradition that Positive Psychology adheres to.* For instance, Positive Psychology does not recommend certain values in a relationship, but research findings concluded that having good relationships is key to an optimized life or "the good life." In addition, it examines how certain virtues are greatly related to optimal functioning: Wisdom and knowledge, courage, love and humanity, justice, temperance, and spiritual and transcendence (Seligman, 2002). *Rather than having unattainable perfectionist's goals, being satisfied at optimum performance or choices taken is key to self optimization* (Ben-Shahar, 2009).

While a positive psychologist is not a coach, Positive Psychology approaches can work well in coaching. However, not all coaches use positive psychology approaches. Using Positive Psychology as a coaching framework will be discussed in the following sections.

Two: Default State of Mind and Role of Optimism

Evolution has endowed human beings with positive and negative feelings, optimism and pessimism. *Both are equally important in ensuring survival of the species.* However, negative feelings like fury, disgust, trepidation, repugnance, and abhorrence are more crucial for fight-or-flight responses when encountering life-threatening issues and in competitions for mating. In the fight for one's life, for instance, following negative feelings would increase one's winning and survival probability, which explains why human beings, including psychologists, have been fixated with negative feelings, such as the renowned psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, who perpetuated the "doctrine" that the human misery stems from infantile sexuality and aggression, which is not more than a theory and not based on an empirical research (Seligman, Alex, Joseph & Boniwell, 2003).

Naturally, it is easier to notice negative things, negative feelings, and negative responses. It also explains why the pre-disposed state of mind is prejudiced. *Negative state of mind activates the much-needed ready-to-go-into-war mode of thinking, which is focusing on the wrongs and being prepared to fix them* (Seligman, 2002). *In contrary, positive thoughts direct people to think creatively with tolerance, generosity, and laterality* (Seligman, 2002), *which are requisites in maintaining a pleasant home and a peaceful environment.*

In a journal article titled "Trait Inferences Based on Racial and Behavioral Cues" (1997), Amherst College Professor of Psychology Allen J. Hart and Professor Marian M. Morry of University of Manitoba confirmed Birt L. Duncan's findings in an experiment in which Black and White actors were given identical behaviors to perform yet the audience's perceptions were significantly different. The audience showed favorable responses towards White actors, while Black actors received less favorable responses. Such findings were consistent after multiple acts were performed.

In a separate experiment, Hart scanned the respondents' brains with a digital imaging device and concluded that a significant change in amygdala part, which registers emotional stimulus, was shown whenever an image of an individual of a different race was shown. Biologically, human beings are wired to be prejudiced unconsciously. Scientifically confirmed, human beings are racists by nature, which is a strong negative biological trait required to survive when our ancestors were cave people, which we still inherit.

On the other hand, positive thinking or optimism is a requirement for progress. Without a sheer sense of optimism, Thomas Edison might not have invented one of the most cherished inventions of all time: The famous light bulb. Without a sheer sense of curiosity mixed with can-do attitude, many other inventions and discoveries could not have been realized. Without optimism, the human race might have stayed in the Stone Age. *The goal of coaching is showing a path to arrive to a future expectation, which is called "a goal" with optimism, positive motivation, and clarity.*

Optimism and pessimism focus on future expectations (Carver, Scheier & Segerstrom, 2010). Optimism takes life to a higher level, while pessimism to a lower level, of life. Based on

multiple studies with patients of serious illnesses, pessimists showed more physiological stress responses that may result in advancement of disease, while optimists showed less stress responses that may result in the opposite. Optimists experienced less rehospitalization after a coronary artery bypass surgery than pessimists (Carver, Scheier & Segerstrom, 2010). In breast cancer patients, optimists tend to stick with their social support group, which is crucial for the treatment, while pessimists tend to withdraw from social activities and experience depression, which are harmful to their health (Carver, Scheier & Segerstrom, 2010).

In another study involving 180 nuns, which is considered one of the most important findings about the significance of optimism, each of their autobiographical sketches were examined (Seligman, 2002). Nuns were chosen as sampling because they lived a uniform lifestyle for years or even tens of years with identical environment, activities, nutrition, and healthcare. The astonishing results showed that 90 percent of most optimistic were still alive when reaching 85 years old, while only 34 percent of pessimistic ones were still alive at that age. Even more astonishing was 54 percent of the most optimistic were still alive when reaching 94 years old, while only 11 percent of pessimistic ones were still alive (Seligman, 2002).

While negativity, positivity, pessimism, and optimism are required in life, choosing positivity and optimism have proven to be more useful in maintaining a balanced environment in which creativity and health are sustainable. *Concluded from the above studies, optimism is an important requisite for health, better life quality, and longevity, which are the foundation of success and long-term happiness.*

Three: State of “Flow,” Optimalism, and Positivity Ratio

The most successful individuals work with passion. “Work on something you love and you don’t need to work one single day in your life” has become a cliché. *Good news is, this cliché is true.* Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined the term “flow” (2008) as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.” Consciousness itself can be defined simply as intentionally ordered information (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). The mind can be trained to perform in certain ways through skillful interventions, such as by training it to be receptive and quiet through meditation and to be more efficient through self discipline.

“Flow” is a state of consciousness in which one’s psychic energy is focused on a specific task so intensely that the surroundings do not matter. *Csikszentmihalyi referred “flow” as a condition in which skill and opportunity are in alignment.* In this condition, no other feelings occur, other than fully focusing on the task at hand effortlessly without burden or anxiety. Optimal concentration occurs naturally without being forced; you simply be. You probably have experienced doing a favorite activity such as playing the piano for hours, writing a novel from dawn to dusk, or detailing a vintage car without realizing it was time for dinner or even bedtime.

The state of “flow” is such a key to experience contentment, happiness, and success. It can’t be replaced by anything, including any method promising instant results. Self-help publications and motivational speeches have been flooding the market, and most tips make a lot of sense but none of them lasts long. Soon after, sudden bursts of motivation subside and self-helpers are back to where they were.

Experiences are perceptions stored as information, which are “packaged” as joyful or hurtful (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Such information should be controlled and the ability to control it in a state of “flow” would translate to long-term enjoyment and contentment, in which enjoyment is savored with a sense of fulfillment, not short-term euphoria. The state of “flow” itself is the meeting of skill and opportunity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), which can be achieved by grounding our expectations realistically, instead of tightly holding it as an unreachable perfectionist or “negative perfectionism” (Ben-Shahar, 2009). *When skill meets opportunity, we can expect optimal result, which is known as “optimalism” or “positive perfectionism”* (Ben-Shahar, 2009).

We should strive to be optimalists, not perfectionists. Optimalists learn as they go and they grow as they learn. They learn from their mistakes, fix them, and perform better as they make more mistakes. They are not scared of mistakes, they welcome them. They know that for every mistake they did, they grow one step further. In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell (2008) concluded that it would take 10,000 (ten thousand) hours to master one skill properly. *An optimalist is eager to reach 10,000 hours, from which the journey requires them learn from both triumphs and mistakes.*

Whenever you find an activity that is not too hard nor too easy, enjoy it fully with a healthy expectation without pushing self too ambitiously (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), as it means

you have found an activity in which the opportunity matches your skill. Be realistic in your goals, enjoy the journey, and be kind to yourself whenever the result goes awry because the process of acknowledging failure is a learning path to develop a coping skill. Accept the fact that we stumble upon roadblocks more than we hoped for and optimists understand that there is no straight line to a goal and we should not fear failure (Ben-Shahar, 2009).

But how “optimal” is good enough? Using 80/20 Pareto Theory, a college student was able to produce a good report using 20 percent of his time instead of going full-fledge to get a perfect A grade (Ben-Shahar, 2009). By having extra time to enjoy other activities, his happiness increased (Ben-Shahar, 2009). The test of whether your life is optimized: Did you strain yourself to fulfill your own expectations? An “optimized” life is not perfect, but it flows with the less strain to your life: marriage, children, career, and relationships. And for a challenge is “optimized,” ask yourself: What’s the chance of success? If it’s half-half, then it is well optimized (Ben-Shahar, 2009).

When we stumble upon a roadblock, remember that failures and difficulties are integral parts within the journey to success and happiness. Carol Dweck wrote *Mindset* (2006) that distinguished two types of mindset: fixed and growth. Mindset itself is a set of beliefs that create an underlying foundation upon which our actions are based. A person with fixed mindset believes that our abilities are unchangeable, that people stay the same. *A person with growth mindset believes that we learn from the lessons in failures and difficulties to grow into a better person.* A person with growth mindset is likely to be resilient (Seligman, 1991).

Positivity itself is the path, not merely the destination. Positivity is also the vehicle of arrival. We don’t become positive after attaining our goals, but we have a better chance of attaining our goals satisfactorily with positivity. *Barbara Frederick in her groundbreaking years of research concluded that it would take three times the positivity to rid of the detrimental effects of negativity* (2009). Ten forms of positivity are: Joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love (Frederick, 2009). Any of the above positivity can broaden our mind so it’s like an opened umbrella ready to shelter other feelings, which is called “broaden effect” (Frederick, 2009). And our mind reacts fast within seconds of any negative or positive stimulus or “injection,” which is responsible for our mood at that time. Maintaining positive outlook is essential to creativity, scope of attention, and accuracy, as researchers at University of Toronto and UC Berkeley Haas School of Business found (Frederick, 2009), which are essential in the achievement of lasting happiness and success.

Four: Coaching Yourself with Principles from Positive Psychology

Coaching is about motivating one's self to arrive to a goal or a set of goals. Motivation itself can be distinguished into three types: biological, external, and internal (Colman, 2010). Biologically-based motivations are simple to notice because without them we cannot function. External forces are usually based on rewards and punishments, which can be found in most institutionalized religions and other institutions. Internal motivation, however, comes from within, from an awareness that by an accomplishment would bring satisfaction.

To achieve an optimized performance, a strong internal motivation is required. And it requires an awareness of how you react against adversity. An individual with positive and growth mindset is known as a “resilient” person. Such individual separate an adversity from beliefs and consequences, which is short for A-B-C (Seligman, 1991). An Adversity is an event, but it is your **B**elief that gives meaning to it, be it negative or positive, which later translates into **C**onsequences: feelings and behaviors.

Positive Psychology recognizes three pillars: the pleasant life involving positive emotions, the engaged life involving positive traits, and the meaningful life involving positive institutions (Duckworth, Steen & Seligman, 2005). The pleasant life refers enjoying short-term activities that would make us “happy” or experience momentary euphoria, like shopping, playing games, and travelling. The positive emotions can be distinguished in their directions: past, present, or future (Seligman, 2001) (Seligman, Alex, Joseph & Boniwell, 2003). The engaged life refers to being absorbed in an activity or a series of activities that would make us in “flow” condition (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), such as playing the violin for hours, trading stocks days in and days out, and writing the next great American novel. The meaningful life refers to the greater purpose of life that would justify other activities, such as taking care of the family and volunteering for humanity.

Coaching itself is a practice of how-to, self-help, and motivational activities combined with a cheerleading attitude, which many scholars find rather amusing. The current popular practice is not based on scientific studies, but based on what works according to the coach and the coaching profession's consensus. It lacks scientific backbones: evidence-based and theoretical, which Positive Psychology can provide (Seligman, 2007). Coaching and Positive Psychology are natural partners in promoting human strengths, thus we can expect to see more coaching using positive psychology approaches (Linley & Harrington, 2005).

Coaching itself has various definitions, ranging from didactic instructions to psychic exploration, which have similar assumptions: human beings are capable of change and growth, goals are set to be fulfilled by the coachee, and the relationship between the coach and the coachee is equal and forms a collaborative partnership (Biswas-Diener, 2009). Professional coaching is an unregulated profession, despite the professional association the International Coach Federation (ICF) that was formed to provide ethical and professional guidelines and trainings (Biswas-Diener, 2009). *For the purpose of self-coaching, Positive Psychology provides the scientific principles, positivity assessments, and reflection points.*

Discussions on scientific theories and research findings can be used as underlying principles of a coaching program. With these findings, you, as your own coach and your own client or a coaching client, can be assured that these principles are not merely hypotheses. They have been scientifically researched and proven:

- Human beings are born with both positive and negative thinking patterns as both are necessary in the survival of the species. *(Do not try to eliminate any negativity or drawback because it will always occur naturally.)*
- Human beings are capable of thinking positively to create a safe and nurturing environment for peace and long-term livelihood. *(Choose to think positively instead of ruminating on negative aspects.)*
- Pollyanna hypothesis has been investigated and it is true that those with positive attitude tend to be more successful than their negative-thinking counterparts. *(It is actually a great thing to have a Pollyanna attitude as it serves as a positive mindset.)*
- Optimists tend to live happier than pessimists. *(Choose optimism.)*
- Optimists tend to live longer than pessimists. *(Choose optimism.)*
- Three pillars of a positive life as set forth by Positive Psychology are: positive emotions, positive traits, and positive institutions. *(Choose positivity.)*
- Sustainable happiness, with success as the natural consequence, is the result of awareness of and maintaining the so-called “flow” state of consciousness. *(Seek your “flow” state.)*
- Optimalists are happier than perfectionists. *(Choose to do optimally than perfectly.)*
- An “optimal” state can be tested with 50-50 chance of accomplishment. *(Test it.)*
- An “optimal” state can be tested with 20-80 Pareto theory, in which 20% of time spent to achieve 80% of optimal result. *(Test it.)*
- The state of “flow” is the meeting of skill and opportunity, which translates to adequately challenging and allowing optimized development of skill and creativity. *(Find yours.)*
- The state of “flow” can be identified with “time stands still” condition in which mental capacity appears to find a path to deliver results without being bothered by external situations. *(Be completely present in an activity and let things flow effortlessly.)*
- It takes three times of positivity to eradicate one count of negativity (3 to 1 ratio). *(Think and feel positively more than negatively.)*

Assessing target areas requiring coaching would give an idea of improvement priorities. They include but not limited to: finances, friendship, marriage/partnership, health, housing, work, family, and relationship with colleagues. Rate the quality of each target area using 1 to 5 scale with 1 as totally dissatisfied and 5 as totally satisfied. Be honest, so you can locate which

areas need strengthening. If you think there are other areas requiring more explorations, feel free to include them.

With each target area, answer these questions, as reflection points:

- Why do I feel dissatisfied (with finances, friendship, marriage/partnership, health, housing, work, family, and relationship with colleagues)?
- What are my strengths and weaknesses (in finances, friendship, marriage/partnership, health, housing, work, family, and relationship with colleagues)?
- Where do I want to take (finances, friendship, marriage/partnership, health, housing, work, family, and relationship with colleagues) in the next five years?
- How can I improve (finances, friendship, marriage/partnership, health, housing, work, family, and relationship with colleagues)?

Create a coaching plan based on the assessments and reflection points.

- Target area (finances, friendship, marriage/partnership, health, housing, work, family, and relationship with colleagues)
- Goal (include the specifics of each target area to attain, such as “pay off credit card”)
- Developmental activities (include activities required to attain the goal of each target area, such as “cardio training one hour per day”)
- Timeline (include the timeline in which activities required to attain the goal of each target area will be completed, such as in days or weeks)
- Measurement of attainment (include the measurable goals of each of target areas, such as “rated 5 in the next employee evaluation”)

Now that you have your coaching plan in place, revisit the Positive Psychology principles often to boost your motivation in accomplishing the goals. Understand that there are good and bad days, triumphs and defeats, which all are parts of the learning process. Be aware of your low points and achieve goals as an “optimalist” instead of a “perfectionist.” Promise yourself to fulfill the coaching plan because you have made an agreement with yourself to succeed and have long-term happiness, which should be attained within the agreed timeframe.

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