

The [Professional Learning Hub](#), Griffith University, is proud to present **Positive on Purpose**, a podcast series by Mia O'Brien

Episode 1 – Happiness



Positivity: why happiness is not enough

I'm Mia O'Brien from the school of education and professional studies at Griffith University, and welcome to my podcast: Positive on purpose – no magical thinking required.

Today's topic is 'Positivity – why happiness is not enough'

So you've made the commitment to positivity, and you're keen to start given the compelling science that demonstrates the sustained benefits of being positive for optimal functioning, wellbeing and success. But what does 'positive' really mean, and how does it apply to our day to day working lives?

To start with, let's get some clarity around the concept of 'positivity'.

Positivity is not simply the 'absence' of negativity.. it is quite the opposite. Positivity is about bringing character, values and commitment to achieving the best outcomes possible, even in the face of negative or difficult situations.

Positivity is a set of values that anchor your life, and this applies to your working life, your social life, your personal life, and your spiritual life. And just as values guide your thinking, behaviours and choices; they can offer a solid point of reference for bringing positivity into your working week.

A commitment to positivity is a commitment first and foremost to an optimistic and hopeful frame of mind. This means that our 'starting point' is always optimism; a belief that life is good, and that good things are possible, that there is hope for the future. Now, by optimism, we mean '*rational* optimism' - in that our beliefs for achieving a good life are informed by a solid sense of perspective, personal responsibility, and engagement in the real world (not some wild aspirations or magical thinking about 'laws of attraction' or similar). We commit to being optimistic and behaving optimistically, even in the face of challenge; and when we experience the knocks that life throws us, we commit to finding that hope and optimism as our default response to difficulty.

Positivity is also a commitment to finding meaning and purpose in life; and acknowledging that it is our personal responsibility to identify this meaning for ourselves.

In that regard, positivity is a commitment to bringing our best to life – the best version of ourselves, socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically. We actively value and aspire to do what it takes to *flourish and thrive in life*.

Lastly, positivity is a commitment to valuing our connectedness to others, and to finding fulfilment in being part of, and contributing to, a community.

Now, the details of what these values look like will vary greatly from person to person, but suffice to say these values hold true for most. To capture these ingredients of positivity, Seligman created the acronym PERMA, P-E-R-M-A which serves as a helpful reference point when we commit to making positivity a part of our daily working lives.

The P in PERMA stands for Positive mindset. That is, we intentionally commit to being optimistic, purposeful and hopeful in every day, in each aspect of our work. We infuse that positivity into the way we talk to others, the way we answer emails and even into the difficult, curly problems that are thrown our way. We respond to negative situations by being solutions focused and proactive. We don't have to be sunny or annoyingly chipper; just rationally and reasonably optimistic about finding the best way forward as often as we can, and about being upbeat and hopeful while we do so.

The E in PERMA stands for Engagement, and by this Seligman is referring to our need to be positively and productively occupied with activities that bring us a sense of purpose and enjoyment. This applies equally to work as to play, and we can really boost our sense of engagement in work by connecting every day to the reasons we're there in the first place, or to the opportunities that working can bring. When we commit to connecting with those reasons, the value of what we do each day becomes palpable. There's also a secondary aspect to engagement, which draws from the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Flow*. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) suggests that "*The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times . . . The best moments usually occur if a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile*". In other words, work can bring us a genuine opportunity to experience meaningful connection to our abilities in very satisfying ways. We just need to be purposeful about how we deploy those abilities, and take time to build the skills required to do them well. Importantly, we also need to appreciate those opportunities, however small or evanescent – every task contributes to a greater whole, and that's what counts in the end.

The R in PERMA is for Relationships, and on this point Seligman is referring to authentic connection. There is no doubt we thrive on connections and positive interaction with others; and in fact, when we are isolated for too long, we run the risk of genuine psychological, neurological and physiological depletion, with dire consequences. Whatever our work day looks like, being positive means fostering relationships that have a genuine sense of connectedness, acceptance and appreciation for our diverse, multifaceted colleagues. That connection can be as simple as greeting people at the beginning of the day or giving over the first few minutes of a meeting to small talk and catching up. Great leaders are approachable, and that approachability rests on their relatability and the relationships they consciously build. This holds on any level – we've all had that experience of being drawn to some colleagues, because they're just so lovely to work with; and unfortunately the opposite experience of going to great lengths to avoid other colleagues, because we just don't want that negativity or energy drain that even a simple exchange can involve. Make the commitment to fostering positive relationships, and you'll find others respond positively to you; it's an investment that pays dividends.

The M in PERMA is for Meaning, and I like to call it the 'why' in our work day. Why are you in this job? Why are you doing what you're doing, the way you're doing it? Why are you taking so much time over this email or that project or with those people... Why? In life, our most insidious anxieties can be traced back to an ambiguous 'why' – or the sense that there is no meaning or purpose in what we are doing. So don't let that be you, not for a moment. Commit to finding a modicum of meaning in every day and in every task you undertake. There's a reason you're in that job, and your abilities in that role have a genuine purpose. Make it real and tangible. And if that meaning isn't to be found on any given day, then add it into the interactions you participate in. Your presence in a meeting can make the world of difference to a team member experiencing uncertainty or disconnection. Your cheerful response to an email can lighten the weight of a colleague's challenging workload. Your helpful demeanour with students or clients can mean the difference between a thriving workplace culture, and a floundering one. Meaning makes everything lighter and brighter, and on the days you can't find it, *bring it*.

Lastly, the A in PERMA is for Accomplishment. So much of our wellbeing is tied to an experience of genuine accomplishment, no matter how modest. A commitment to positivity is a commitment to setting goals, aspiring to purpose, and celebrating every goal achieved – and again, no matter *how small*. Accomplishment boosts our sense of purpose, satisfaction and confidence. It doesn't matter if the goal is to be on time for the meeting, to answer emails with a friendlier tone, or to simply complete the list of 'to do's' for the day so you're one day closer to finishing that project or paper. Completing those goals is an accomplishment worth savouring; and that glow of accomplishment transfers itself into an array of positive benefits for you and for others. But the important thing here is how you feel about yourself. Making a commitment to check in with your purpose and make some modest goals each day, which are then savoured and celebrated at the end of day, will boost your sense of positivity a hundred fold.

So positivity is a commitment to optimism, purposeful engagement, authentic and productive relationships, meaningful work and savouring accomplishments; this is a commitment that you can bring to every aspect of your working day, no matter how small or insignificant some of those days might seem. What matters most is that you bring the best version of yourself to those days, and take time to reflect on and relish the opportunities that working can bring.

Now, you might have noticed a theme running through this podcast – as we've unpacked 'positivity', much of what we've talked about has to do with how you think about yourself and the stories you tell yourself - about your purpose, about your worth, about your relationship with others, and about yourself. That is the topic of the next podcast – Stories we tell ourselves: the ultimate superpower. Thank you for joining me today! I'm Mia O'Brien, please join me next time on Positive on Purpose, where we unpack the powerful role that self-talk plays in our lives, and examine strategies for getting it right.