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**Finding and Fostering the Positive in Relationships:  
Positive Interventions in Couples Therapy**

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### Abstract

Research of positive psychology interventions has expanded dramatically in recent years, and many novel positive psychology interventions may be useful in couples therapy. The present work identifies, summarizes, and suggests adaptations of positive psychology interventions that may improve couples therapy outcomes. Each intervention is presented as part of a larger organizational framework that may help couples therapists determine how and when each intervention can be effectively applied. Finally, a case illustration demonstrates how these methods can complement traditional therapeutic approaches.

Keywords: Positive psychology, relationships, couples, strengths

## Introduction

Research of positive psychology interventions (PPIs) has expanded dramatically in recent years, giving rise to a large and growing body of literature that may be applicable to couples psychotherapy. Couples therapists may feel overwhelmed by this multitude of riches; it is difficult to extract the specific methods that are applicable to couples therapy from the growing positive psychology (PP) literature. Equally challenging is the task of combining PP-based methods into a coherent strategy. In this article, we identify, summarize, and suggest adaptations of positive psychology interventions that may improve couples therapy outcomes. Interventions are presented as part of a three-step organizational framework, which may help couples therapists determine how and when specific interventions can be most effectively applied.

The first step of the organizational framework involves balancing the focus—learning to complement our usual focus on pathologies and problems with an emphasis on relationship strengths and goals. Step two examines interventions that can increase a couple’s reservoir of positive emotion. In the final step, we build a lexicon of strengths, and discuss strategies that can help partners cultivate awareness of each others’ greatest qualities.

We emphasize from the outset that these PP methods are a supplement—but by no means a replacement—to essential pathology-focused intervention. Contrary to misperceptions, positive psychologists do not endorse unbridled or unbalanced focus on the positive. We do not espouse that all individuals are paragons of mental health, nor do we discount the importance of openly addressing problems. Positive psychologists simply believe that clients will benefit more from therapy if clinicians help people metabolize the full range of life experiences; the comfort and joy, as well as the pain and grief.

There is also a possibility that positive interventions can provide traditional psychotherapy with a “booster” effect. While we need to research this area, anecdotal evidence suggests that adjunctive positive interventions can increase the effectiveness of ongoing treatment as usual.

Complementing efforts to fix problems with efforts to cultivate the positive in relationships is not proposed solely on the basis of ideology; there is a growing body of research suggesting that a balance between these two fundamental approaches gives rise to better treatment outcomes than either approach individually. Studies suggest, for example, that a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative comments predicts long-term marriage stability, while a ratio of 0.8:1 or lower predicts divorce (Gottman, 2004). Achieving healthier ratios of positivity to negativity is, of course, far more achievable if both sides of the equation are addressed. Many other findings suggest that bolstering positive aspects of relationships can produce substantial and long-term benefits (e.g., Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004; Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Perhaps the most convincing evidence in support of this claim comes from a recent meta-analysis of more than 200 studies. After scrutinizing four decades of research, study authors found that frequent positive affect precedes—and is likely to promote—outcomes including greater sociability, more and better friendships, improved skill in conflict resolution, and enhanced marital satisfaction (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

### **Three PP Steps in Couples Therapy**

#### *Step 1: Balancing the Focus*

For our cave-dwelling ancestors, a negative focus was essential for survival; those who were most keenly aware of threats from predators were most likely to survive and bequeath their negativity-inducing genes to progeny. The genes that kept our ancestors focused on threats

persist in the gene pool today, and may partially explain a phenomenon that has been described simply as “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Vohs, & Finkenauer, 2001).

This phenomenon involves a tendency to experience a wide range of negative events more powerfully than positive events. For most individuals, negative information and negative emotion have greater psychological impact than positive information and positive emotion of comparable magnitude.

As a result of this negativity bias, as well as influence of the medical model, we have well-developed ideas regarding relationship dysfunction, but less well-defined ideas regarding healthy relationships. Our negativity bias may also be one of the factors that motivates therapists to focus far more on pathology than on positive issues. It may be helpful for psychotherapists to gain familiarity with positive relationship models, and to supplement their efforts to palliate pathology with efforts to promote positive aspects of relationships.

To paint a clearer picture of a positive relationship, we draw upon the seminal work of psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller (1986), who describes five characteristics of “growth-fostering relationships.” She suggests that such relationships are marked by zest, empowerment, knowledge, self-worth, and connection. Growth-fostering relationships empower people to undertake novel actions and challenges both within and beyond the relationship context, and are conducive to a pattern of growth in which individuals often gain new knowledge about their partners. A sense of self-worth arises from growth-fostering relationships when one partner validates the other’s experiences and emotions. Finally, partners in growth-fostering relationships develop a desire to forge new connections with people outside of the relationship and to strengthen connections in existing relationships.

Therapists can keep these qualities in mind as their work proceeds, using this relationship model to gauge a couple's progress toward more positive functioning. The therapist can consider questions such as: "How much zest is in this relationship? Are any elements of growth-fostering relationships sorely lacking?" Components of this relationship model can also be assessed formally with the Relationship Health Index (Liang et al., 2002), a psychometrically sound instrument.

Enhancing therapists' awareness of the positive may be invaluable, but this is only part of the equation; it is also important that *clients* develop a more balanced focus. Couples often get entangled in a cycle of negativity that is difficult to disrupt. In accordance with the negativity bias, individuals ruminate on negative aspects of their relationships, while devoting little attention to the positive. Partners' past mistakes loom large, while memories of joy and caring are often obscured.

How can we help couples to balance their perspectives? We might begin, as many couples therapists already do, by acknowledging clients' challenges, and reminding them that the relationship also has assets that can provide a foundation for growth. Many evidence-based PPIs are now available that may help couples capitalize on these relationship assets.

One of the most well-researched PPIs is the "gratitude visit," a simple exercise that has been shown to enhance well-being and decrease depression for at least 6 months (e.g., Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Instructions for this exercise are as follows. Think of a person you feel gratitude towards, for something he or she has done in the past. Draft a concrete and well-written letter to this individual, describing what the person did, and how your life today is better as a result. Call this individual, and arrange to meet with him or her. Do not mention the

purpose of your meeting. When you meet with your “gratitude recipient,” read your letter aloud, with passion.

Learning to forgive transgressors often presents a greater challenge (e.g., Lyubomirsky, 2008). Although forgiveness can be difficult, it can also be essential for long-term relationship stability. Rather than initially delving into the forgiveness of egregious transgressions, an introductory forgiveness exercise may be beneficial (Lyubomirsky, 2008). In this exercise, clients revisit experiences in which the roles were reversed—a time when the current forgiver endured the role of “forgivee.” Revisiting such experiences may help people empathize with the shame and turmoil of being a transgressor, and open people to the possibility of forgiveness.

The Letting Go of Grudges exercise (K. Reivich, personal communication, February, 2009) may also help couples cultivate the ability to forgive. In this exercise, each partner thinks of a grudge they harbor regarding their significant other, and writes a description of the grudge in the center of a circle on an otherwise blank sheet of paper. Each person then draws 15 additional circles around the central “grudge circle,” and fills these peripheral circles with a word or phrase that captures something they appreciate about their partner. Peripheral circles can enclose a positive characteristic, or a positive memory of the partner. The purpose is not to dismiss negative issues. Rather, the purpose is simply to expand the focus, to help people pay attention to positive aspects of their partners and relationships.

Couples may benefit not only from healthy responses to transgression, but also from healthy responses to positive events. The manner in which one partner responds when the other shares positive news, in fact, is a better predictor of relationship well-being and break-up than partners’ responses to negative events (Gable et al., 2006). Therefore, learning to respond effectively to positive news may be a key skill for couples to develop.

When an individual describes a positive event to his or her partner, the partner can respond in several ways. Some responses are enthusiastic, while others are understated. While some responses are positive in nature, others are dismissive, demeaning, or otherwise negative. These response types can be categorized as active vs. passive, and constructive vs. destructive. A two-by-two table can be constructed displaying all possible combinations of these response types (see Table 1). At the bottom of this typology is the passive negative response—a curmudgeonly, unenthusiastic, dismissive acknowledgment of another person’s good news. Active constructive responding (ACR) lies at the opposite end of the spectrum. Responses that are active and constructive are marked by energy, vitality, and positivity.

Table 1. *Typology of Responses to Positive Disclosures.*

	<b>Constructive Response</b>	<b>Destructive Response</b>
<b>Active Response</b>	<p><b>Active Constructive:</b></p> <p>Partner 1: I got a raise at work today!</p> <p>Partner 2: “That's so great! I'm proud of you! How shall we celebrate?”</p>	<p><b>Active Destructive:</b></p> <p>Partner 1: I got a raise at work today!</p> <p>Partner 2: “Do you think you can hand responsibility? Managing this money is just going to be another chore.”</p>
<b>Passive Response</b>	<p><b>Passive Constructive:</b></p> <p>Partner 1: I got a raise at work today!</p> <p>Partner 2: “That’s nice.” (Stated without enthusiasm or eye contact)</p>	<p><b>Passive Destructive:</b></p> <p>Partner 1: I got a raise at work today!</p> <p>Partner 2: “It’s not enough to pay the bills.” (Stated without enthusiasm or eye contact)</p>

This typology of responses is not merely an intellectual exercise; the model describes patterns of behavior that predict important relationship outcomes (Gable, et al., 2006; Gable et al., 2004), and that are modifiable through relatively simple intervention (e.g., Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). The four basic response types can be easily explained, and couples can be

encouraged to respond in an active constructive manner. One recent study found success in encouraging people to respond actively and constructively at least once per day for one week when interacting with a partner or other individual (Seligman et al., 2006). In relationships marked by ACR, partners may feel more understood, validated, cared for, and satisfied with their relationships (Gable, et al., 2006).

It is striking that, of the four possible response types, only the active constructive response appears to enhance relationships. Evidence suggests that the other three response types all predict far poorer relationship outcomes. Destructive responses are obviously dysfunctional, and counterintuitive findings suggest that the passive-constructive response is just as unhelpful as destructive response patterns (Gable et a., 2006).

### *Step 2: Enhancing Positive Emotions*

In addition to its intrinsic value, positive emotion may also give rise to a variety of benefits that are important in the context of couples therapy. Evidence suggests, for example, that positive affect encourages interpersonal openness (Fredrickson et al., in press), which may be beneficial for the relationship and the therapeutic process. Positive emotion can also promote “big picture thinking” (e.g., Fredrickson & Branigan 2005), and may therefore help couples transcend their focus on relatively minor grievances.

To help couples access more positive affect, it is important to first acknowledge that positive affect can be enhanced in many ways, and that different approaches work best for different people (e.g., Lyubomirsky, 2008). Some find a present-focused experience more fulfilling, while others are energized by focusing on the past or the future. Couples can learn to appreciate their differences in this regard, rather than allowing each partner to assume that his or

her own path to positive affect is also ideal for the other. When selecting PPIs, one takes into account clients' strengths and unique lifestyles. A formal "person-activity fit diagnostic" is also available; this may help individuals select PPIs in a more structured and evidence-based manner (Lyubomirsky, 2008).

One well-studied technique for enhancing positive emotion is the Three Good Things exercise. Instructions for this exercise are as follows. Each night, just before going to sleep, write down three things that you are grateful for, or that went well during the preceding day. Items can be small in scope, such as "my husband took my place in the carpool." For each item, also answer the following question: What did I do to help make the good thing happen? This question can help you appreciate your own role in positive events. You might write something like: "I mentioned to my husband that I have a busy week." This deceptively simple exercise has been shown to increase happiness and decrease depressive symptoms for at least six months (Seligman et al., 2005). To modify this intervention for couples, the therapist might ask clients to identify one good thing that their partner did each day, for one week. After identifying a partner's positive behavior, each individual might be asked to consider what they did to encourage this behavior. In therapy it is often nearly automatic to explore each partner's contribution to negative dynamics. We suggest that couples therapists can harness a more balanced perspective to begin bringing equal attention and rigor to positive relationship dynamics.

In addition to focusing on positive events that have occurred in the recent past, one can also enhance positive emotion by considering positive events that may take place in the future. The Best Possible Future Self exercise (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006) may be helpful to this end. Clients are asked to imagine themselves in the future, and to assume that everything has gone as well as it possibly could. They have worked hard and accomplished all of their goals and

dreams. In couples therapy, it may be helpful to modify this exercise by asking couples to describe their relationship five years in the future, again assuming that everything has gone as well as it possibly could. In addition to promoting positive affect, this may help the couple clarify relationship goals, and prompt each partner to assume his or her share of the responsibility for bringing their ideal future to fruition. In the midst of relationship strife, it is easy for couples to imagine the future as a downward spiral ending in divorce. This exercise can help couples clearly visualize an upward spiral, and may help foster optimism.

Having discussed PPIs that address the past (Three Good Things) and the future (Best Possible Future Self), we turn our attention to an exercise that focuses on the present. An alternate path to positive emotion is through *savoring* life's pleasures, both those that are subtle and those that are spectacular (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Couples can be encouraged to set aside a period of time—which can be as short as 30 minutes per week—and to devote this time to focusing mindfully on pleasurable activities. It is not important which activities are chosen, but it is essential that individuals savor in the present moment. When savoring, one cannot rush through experiences in the same way that many people rush through their day-to-day lives. Savoring involves slowing down, doing just one activity at a time, and focusing attention fully on the joys that can be found in the present moment. This technique might be considered a specific type of mindfulness skill, and it is an excellent way to help busy people manage stress.

### *Step 3: Building on Strengths*

A large body of research suggests that the tendency to see strengths in a partner is one of the most powerful predictors of relationship longevity. Those who are highly aware of positive qualities in their partners—even qualities that others fail to notice—are far more likely to be happy in their relationships, and far less likely to break up or divorce (e.g., Murray, 2005;

Murray, Holmes, Dolderman, & Griffin, 2000). It may be crucial to guide individuals through the process of identifying and focusing on partners' strengths.

Perhaps the best tool available for developing a focus on partners' qualities is the Values in Action Institute Survey of Character (VIA-IS; Mayerson Foundation, 2007). The VIA project was a massive effort to identify the strengths of character that are valued by the majority of the world's cultures. The product was a typology of 24 character strengths, such as kindness, curiosity, and creativity. A psychometrically sound inventory for assessing these strengths is available for free online (Mayerson Foundation, 2007).

The purpose of the VIA, fundamentally, is assessment. Therapists might request that couples complete the measure before a session, or as part of an intake packet. After completing the Inventory, therapists might review VIA feedback with clients. It may be useful to identify complementarities in couples' strengths profiles, to consider how strengths of one partner relate to strengths of the other partner, and to ask that each individual reflect on ways in which their partner's strengths arise in day-to-day life. Clients might be encouraged to identify specific actions in their partners that exemplify use of partners' signature strengths.

It may be helpful for couples to intentionally apply their strengths in new ways within the relationship. This may provide additional pathways for couples to build their capacity to connect with one another. For example, one might apply the strengths of kindness and social intelligence by finding a new way to make one's partner smile. Clients might be asked to apply their strengths in a new way every day for one week. This approach has been shown to enhance psychological well-being and reduce depression for at least six months (e.g., Seligman et al., 2005).

These types of exercises may generate useful questions that therapists can pose to their clients. At moments of conflict or distress, the therapist can help the couple explore questions like: “How can you use your strength of curiosity (or creativity, or authenticity) to help resolve this issue?” If this is effective in the context of a therapy session, the partner can be encouraged to replicate this strengths-based approach outside of the office.

A strengths-based approach can also be useful for “fanning the embers of fondness” for one’s partner (Seligman, 2002, p. 198). In this strengths-based exercise, each individual is asked to identify the three VIA strengths that characterize their partner’s best qualities. Clients write down examples of recent behaviors that illustrate their partners’ strengths. The couple then trades descriptions of each others’ strengths, and specific examples of how strengths have come to fruition. This exercise may help each partner feel validated by the other partner’s recognition, and may motivate a partner to live up to descriptions of himself or herself as a loving, fair, or forgiving individual (Seligman, 2002).

### **Case Illustration**

#### *Client Description and Presenting Problem*

John and Jane were in their early forties, and had been married for 10 years. Both were deeply unhappy with their relationship. The two often merely tolerated each other, and they led largely separate lives. Connection felt impossible. Each partner blamed the other for the distance between them, and both partners felt hurt and rejected. While John and Jane had both contemplated divorce, they were committed to making their relationship work for the sake of their sons, who were six and nine years of age. Moreover, despite their marital challenges, John and Jane did still love each other.

John felt that he was responsible for everything, that Jane was “out of it” much of the time, and that she could never handle minor criticism. Professionally, Jane was highly competent. At home, however, John felt that she reverted to “little girl mode,” and that he had to “run the show.” John did not want to leave the marriage, but felt that he was getting very little for himself.

Although his marital difficulties had been ongoing for some time, John felt that he and Jane should be able to work things out on their own; he did not present for therapy until Jane demanded that he do so. John felt lonely, poorly understood, emotionally abandoned, and pessimistic regarding potential for improvement in the marriage. He did not expect therapy to help. Although John was on the depressive continuum, he did not meet diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder. Despite feeling dysthymic at times, his level of functioning was generally high. He exercised regularly, and felt that other aspects of his life were good.

Jane, on the other hand, felt that John was devaluing her—that he overlooked the substantial contributions she made at home, as well as her efforts to improve their marriage. She acknowledged being “fuzzy-headed” at times, but also felt that John’s oversensitivity to her moods created many of the problems that he then blamed on her. Both agreed that their marriage felt acceptable for just two months of the year, and that the rest of their time was chronically painful. Jane also came from an incestuous family, though she had not been directly abused. She had been in individual therapy for many years, and her therapist felt that she had made significant progress.

In contrast to the marital relationship, the couple’s co-parenting relationship was unproblematic and effective. Each felt personally gratified as a parent, and each felt that the other was an excellent parent. Very few of their impasses involved their well-adjusted children.

*Case Formulations and Course of Treatment: Traditional Approaches*

In accordance with our belief that positive psychology should supplement (but not replace) traditional methods, we first approach the case from cognitive and dynamic perspectives. We then describe how positive psychology interventions served as productive adjunct therapies. Couples work based on the cognitive and dynamic case formulations helped Jane and John progress to a significantly less destructive relationship. The therapy helped them progress from a “negative seven to a zero.” Their methods of relating improved significantly, but their marriage was by no means vibrant.

Interpreting the case from a cognitive perspective, it was clear that John and Jane had numerous distorted thoughts. These distortions incited each partner to conceptualize the other as the cause of their mutual distress. Both partners showed significant personalization, catastrophization, overgeneralization, and black and white thinking.

Addressing destructive cognitions led to improvement in the couple’s patterns of behavior. Each partner took more responsibility for automatic thoughts, reflected upon these thoughts, and disputed their own faulty assumptions. This led John and Jane to interpret events in their marriage in a way that brought them closer to neutral, and helped to slow their descent into conflict. However, with only rare exception, cognitive intervention alone did not prevent them from re-entering their negative cycle.

A psychodynamic perspective suggested that John and Jane were a “perfect” match; their negative dynamics were nearly symmetrical. Each partner triggered a powerful maternal transference in the other. John experienced that Jane would feel and behave as John’s mother would have, and vice-versa. For John, Jane’s withdrawal activated memories of his depressed, often unavailable, borderline mother. This triggered a downward spiral that led John to act in a

critical and angry manner, and to become unduly pessimistic and withdrawn. His behavior, in turn, happened to be a near-perfect imitation of Jane's mother. Jane felt threatened by this way of relating. She became angry, but could not communicate her experience or its origin. Instead, she withdrew, became disconnected from her husband, and felt helpless. Jane's lack of availability intensified John's pessimism, hostility, and certainty that they were doomed to lead separate lives in the same house. Contrary to the therapist's original hypothesis, issues relating to Jane's paternal relationship were not the core of the marital dysfunction. Exploration of intra- and interpersonal dynamics helped the couple become aware of how their behavior patterns were fueled by past familial experiences. A better understanding of these phenomena helped each partner become more empathic to the experience of the other, and helped them choose to connect.

Approaching the case from a PP perspective, the couple appeared to be chronically deprived of positive experiences with each other. Using the above interventions, the couple was able to ameliorate a substantial amount of relationship dysfunction. PPIs were a useful supplement to the therapy; these interventions helped the couple transition to the positive side of the scale.

A positive psychological assessment of the couple utilized measures including the Approaches to Happiness Questionnaire (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005) and the aforementioned Values in Action Institute Survey of Character (VIA-IS). Jane was high in both positive and negative affect, while John was high in negative affect and lower in positive affect. The Approaches to Happiness measure—which assesses the prominence of hedonism, engagement, and meaning in an individual's life—suggested that Jane was low in the hedonic approach to happiness, extremely high in engagement, and moderate in purpose. John was

moderate in the hedonic path, low in engagement, and moderate in purpose. The VIA-IS reported the following top character strengths for Jane: curiosity, capacity to love and be loved, and zest. John's top strengths were authenticity, prudence, and judgment.

### *Reversing the Focus*

John and Jane found several PPIs that helped them appreciate what each partner brought to the marriage. The Three Good Things exercise was modified for couples therapy by asking each partner what the other did that was positive when things went wrong. Over time, this evolved into a more direct exploration of what they felt the other did well, and they eventually attempted the exercise for themselves on a daily basis for one week. Doing so helped them notice the myriad of day-to-day tasks that each partner did to help the other, such as cooking meals, organizing children's schedules, and helping to put their children to bed. The partners' appreciation for each other gradually increased, as they integrated their new awareness of each others' contributions into the ways they thought about one another.

Jane found the "Letting Go of Grudges" exercise to be surprisingly useful. She was initially averse to the idea of forgiveness. However, she quickly understood that the exercise was not aimed at forcing her to give up negative feelings, but rather to see if other experiences could balance out these feelings. Once she understood this, her curiosity took over and she tried it. As she did the exercise for the first time, she realized that she could feel positively and negatively about her husband at the same time. "Now when I see John starting to react negatively," Jane explained, "I think 'Oh God, not again. I hate when he does this.' I can then visualize a circle with what I dislike in it, and try to remind myself why I married him—that's what fits in the other circles. I remember my respect for his unique way of seeing things, his incredible reliability and parenting, and all of the helpful things he does every day. I feel able to hang on to

what's good about him and us, and I can stay more constructive and present." John described his experience with this exercise quite differently. "I've never filled out the form, but I do remind myself of the Jane I love, not the one that's in front of me at that moment."

#### *Enhancing Positive Emotions:*

For John and Jane, the reversal exercises helped them access more positive emotion regarding each other, which at times helped to create more positive interactions and a positive upward spiral. Therapy never included the "Best Possible Future Self" exercise explicitly, but they did respond to focused questions asking what their relationship would look like if they were able to be at their best with one another. They found this exercise mildly useful, but, for both partners, focusing on the present felt more appropriate.

In that light, they invested more time in savoring positive experiences with one another. Bearing in mind that their approaches to happiness were not identical, the couple planned some activities that John would appreciate most, and some that were more appealing to Jane. John was more interested in physical and sexual sources of connection, while Jane found a stronger source of connection in talking and being involved together in activities. Over time they developed greater generosity toward each other. Their sex life improved as Jane began to see this as part of a larger effort for marital closeness, and she found that she could apply savoring techniques to this aspect of her life. Jane also joined him more often on trips to the gym. John was willing to go to the theater more frequently, and to watch movies that Jane loved. Both realized that infusing the relationship with more fun was a necessity, not a luxury.

#### *Building Strengths*

Applying a strengths-based model, John and Jane were able to cultivate greater appreciation for each others' unique qualities. Jane found it particularly useful to clearly identify

John's strengths of authenticity, prudence, and judgment, and to see these strengths in a new light. When John launched into a discourse about Jane's faults, she saw this as part of his capacity for authenticity and judgment, which were characteristics she valued highly in other contexts. She used a similar strategy with regard to John's strength of prudence. Jane had previously been frustrated by John's need to plan; she experienced this behavior as controlling and compulsive. However, she was able to begin appreciating John's keen awareness of strategy and time sense, and to "borrow" these skills by requesting his advice when this strength could be constructively applied to Jane's own problems. John was able to appreciate Jane's capacity to love and be loved, to understand how helpful this strength was as a mother, and to see how hard Jane was working to improve their relationship.

In addition to nurturing appreciation of each others' strengths, the VIA-IS assessment also allowed the partners to better harness their own strengths. For example, Jane utilized her strength of curiosity to resolve recurrent conflicts. John often felt that she was "tuning him out," while Jane thought that he was often overly critical. When heated discussions about these feelings arose, Jane would ask herself: "How can I use my curiosity to get through this conversation?" Just having this question in mind shifted her experience of the encounter, and helped her stay connected to her husband's emotions. Mustering all the curiosity she could, she often found herself wondering what caused John to erupt in some cases, but not others. This led her to better understand John's concerns, and John felt more validated. More generally, the strengths orientation helped them develop a positive language to appreciate each other's preferences, rather than giving in to the temptation to devalue each other.

By the end of their therapy—which lasted for two years at a frequency of three sessions per month—the couple felt that their marriage was acceptable and comfortable for 10 months of

the year, and that the other two months remained difficult. They did feel that negative spirals could now often be “fixed” within a day, whereas negative spirals that occurred prior to therapy generally led to months of marital discord.

### *Prognosis and Outcome*

The couple's relationship was significantly improved, although it was still fragile at times. Conflicts arose that threatened to propel the marriage into negative spirals, but recovery from these crashes was quicker, and they occurred far less often. Their positive focus and language created more connection, positive emotion, and interpersonal openness. John and Jane now use multiple methods—from cognitive, psychodynamic, and PP traditions—to prevent descent into negative spirals. These methods have helped them to stabilize their relationship, and to cultivate the positive spiral that they now frequently enjoy.

### **Clinical Issues and Summary**

The present article may begin to provide a blueprint for incorporation of positive psychology interventions into couples therapy. We have described PP-based methods that may help couples therapists to integrate and apply the findings of positive psychological science in clinical practice. These methods can help couples attend to positive issues, enhance positive emotion, and develop awareness of their partners' strengths. It is our hope that these PP methods will help individuals resolve relationship conflict and achieve more fulfilling and lasting relationships.

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