

Living Your Best Life with MS
SUPPORT GROUP DISCUSSIONS

EVERYDAY
MATTERS

FACILITATOR GUIDE



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MATERIALS

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DISCUSSIONS

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Overview: Living Your Best Life with MS

Phase one of *Everyday Matters* was an interactive, national project that uncovered stories of real people facing the everyday challenges that MS can bring on the path to one's best life. In addition to providing a platform - everydayMSmatters.org - that shared the stories of five participants with MS, the project provided participants and the greater MS community with connections and access to experts and tools, which they put to use in their own lives. In addition to the development and launch of an in-person workshop curriculum and group discussions, multi-channel resources are available at everydayMSmatters.org, including:

- professional videos chronicling participant progress
- participant journals
- online videos and tutorials
- offline printable self-assessments and worksheets

Discussion objectives

- The group will begin to explore the use of the principles of positive psychology to address the everyday challenges of living with MS.
- This discussion is about asking all of us to change the way we look at happiness generating behaviors and habits - how to find happiness when we don't think we can.
- Many people in the group will be taken outside their comfort zone to explore new ideas. We ask that everyone have an open mind to what we will be learning.

Key messages

- Change is possible. Utilizing these principles can make a real, lasting difference in our lives.
- Principles can create change even in personal crisis.
- Not everything we discuss will work for you, but that doesn't mean you should give up trying to find what does.

We can bring more happiness into our everyday lives by using simple and proven strategies - to provide the tools and resources to help reset our default. The *Everyday Matters* program was developed as a tool to assist people living with MS to find those strategies to support ongoing happiness, even in the face of adversity.



Group Facilitator Notes

The *Everyday Matters* support group discussion guide was designed to facilitate group discussion around the principles of positive psychology. Groups can decide together to focus on one or more principle; at one meeting or over the course of several meetings. Kick-off the discussion or first of several discussions with Section One: Introduction to Positive Psychology. Then select the principle(s) the group would like to learn about, develop and practice. If discussing the principles over the course of several meetings, you may want to begin subsequent meetings with a quick check in to find out how group members are using the principles of positive psychology. End the discussion or last of several discussions with Section Three: Discussion Wrap-Up. Section three includes a list of resources and the “Keep the Momentum Going” discussion tools for those who discussed more than one principle.

As your group’s leader you may choose to facilitate the program or perhaps invite a guest speaker, such as a psychologist, mental health professional, social worker or life coach. You are encouraged to watch the orientation video, view the program videos, visit everydayMSmatters.org for an overview of each principle of positive psychology and review the participant workbook before beginning the group discussion.

Additionally:

- One of the program’s key messages is that happiness is a choice, which undoubtedly many group members may not immediately accept. It is important to reiterate that change takes time and is not easy, and to refer to the successes and messages shared by the five participants in the first phase of the project.
- To deepen the learning and self-exploration processes for program participants, several online self-assessment tools and tests have been identified in the toolkit participant handout and are offered as outside learning activities for group members.
- Due to the highly sensitive and emotional nature of the content being discussed you may find some group members require additional support to address the feelings they are experiencing. Since mental health counseling is outside the scope of your role as support group leader, it is recommended you discuss the situation with the group member, with an offer to connect him/her with your Society staff partner for follow-up.



Program Discussion Overview

Agenda – Discussion at Only One Group Meeting

- Introduction to the Principles of Positive Psychology
- Choose 1 or more principle to discuss
- Review resources to learn more about Positive Psychology
- Survey

Agenda – Discussion Over the Course of Several Group Meetings

Meeting 1:

- Introduction to the Principles of Positive Psychology
- Choose 1 or more principle to discuss

Meeting 2:

- Choose 1 or more principle to discuss

Meeting 3:

- Choose 1 or more principle to discuss
- Keep the Momentum Going – the Ripple Effect
- Review resources to learn more about Positive Psychology
- Survey

Section One: Introduction to the Principles of Positive Psychology

THE PRINCIPLES OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Positive psychology focuses on growth and well-being. While other branches of psychology tend to focus on dysfunction and abnormal behavior, positive psychology is centered on helping people thrive and become happier and more productive. Positive psychology does precisely the opposite of traditional modern psychology - it focuses on what an individual *is* rather than what he or she *isn't*.

At its core, positive psychology is the belief that people actively seek and inherently desire happiness. How that happiness plays out (whether through financial success, a fulfilling career, the upbringing of a family, love, stability or freedom, for example) is different from person to person. In his research, Dr. Martin Seligman, a leader in the positive psychology movement, identified the positive personal strengths that move people toward their ideals of happiness: courage, social skills, a good work ethic, honesty, optimism, perseverance and hope. Positive psychology offers strategies to help people develop and enhance these personal strengths.

RESEARCH FINDINGS IN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Some of the major findings of positive psychology include:

- People are generally happy.
- Some of the best ways to combat disappointments and setbacks include strong social relationships and character strengths.
- Work can be important to well-being, especially when people are able to engage in work that is purposeful and meaningful.
- While happiness is influenced by genetics, people can learn to be happier by developing optimism, gratitude and altruism. Money doesn't necessarily buy well-being; but spending money on other people can make individuals happier.



WHAT IS POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY?

Talking points

- Positive psychology is one of the newest branches of psychology.
- Simply put, while many other branches of psychology tend to focus on dysfunction and abnormal behavior, positive psychology is centered on helping people become happier.
- Some of the major findings of positive psychology include:
 - People are generally happy.
 - Some of the best ways to combat disappointments and setbacks include strong [social relationships](#) and character strengths.

We know that

- Happiness is actually a learned trait. It is a choice, and often a difficult one at that.
- Happiness is not just a mood; it's a work ethic.
- If we can change our mindset, i.e., change the way we view what's going on in our world, we can raise our levels of happiness.
- What we need to do, though, is find out how we can make that choice more often.
- Focus on what you have, not on what you've lost - this is an important shift in mindset to make.
- Positive psychology is the study of what works, not just what is broken.

Why this program now?

- We know MS can bring many challenges.
- We know MS can test even the best within us.
- MS can bring what can feel like a never-ending cycle of loss and grief and learning a new normal.
- We know MS can be isolating and take us to a negative space where you may feel stuck.
- We know the principles of positive psychology work and want to bring them to the larger MS community. Happiness is at the center of success.
- We want to provide you the tools and skillset to find a sense of control in what may not always be controllable circumstances.



DISCUSSION: HOW DO WE SHIFT FROM FOCUSING ON THE NEGATIVE TO LOOKING AT THE POSITIVE?

Over the course of our study of principles of positive psychology we are going to discuss strategies that get us to more positive habits. The keys to permanent, positive change (habits) are:

- Creating habits that automatically show positive results without using much energy or willpower.
- Practicing habits until they become automatic rituals in everyday life.

Discussion questions

- Why is changing behavior so hard?
- What can we do to make changing behaviors easier?

Ask group members to share any thoughts they have on what was presented.

Section Two: Principles of Positive Psychology

PRINCIPLE 1: HAPPINESS AS A HABIT = THE HAPPINESS ADVANTAGE

Tools

- Happiness Advantage Video ([video – 3 minutes](#))
- [Happiness as A Habit webpage](#)
- Refer participants to page 4 of the workbook

Overview

For untold generations, we have been led to believe that happiness orbited around success. That if we work hard enough, we will be successful and only if we are successful will we become happy. Success was thought to be the fixed point of the work universe, with happiness revolving around it. Now, thanks to breakthroughs in the burgeoning field of positive psychology, we are learning that the opposite is true. When we are happy - when our mindset and mood are positive - we are smarter, more motivated, and thus more successful.

Ask the group to share their personal definition of happiness. Ask if this definition has changed since diagnosis and in what ways.



Talking points

- It is a misconception that success breeds happiness.
- Happiness is a choice.
- Waiting to be happy limits our potential for success.
- There is no single meaning for happiness. Happiness is relative to the person experiencing it. It's based on how we each feel about our own lives.

There are a number of proven ways to raise levels of happiness

- Meditation
- Three gratitudes
- Journaling
- Finding something to look forward to
- Committing conscious acts of kindness
- Infusing positivity into your surroundings
- Exercising
- Spending money, but not on "stuff"
- Exercising a signature strength

Not all of what is listed above will resonate with everyone, so be sure to elicit additional responses. What is important is finding the activity that fits the person.

Discussion questions

- Reflect on the past 24 hours. Pick out something positive that occurred. When you get in the habit of identifying something good that has occurred, it makes it easier to focus on the good in the present.
- Has anyone used any of these strategies prior to coming to the meeting? If yes, what are their experiences?
- Which of the strategies resonate most with individual group members?

Action Steps

- Choose one of the techniques and commit to trying it before our next meeting.



PRINCIPLE 2: BUILDING YOUR COMMUNITY = SOCIAL INVESTMENT

Tools

- Social Investment Video ([video – 5 minutes](#))
- [Building Your Community webpage](#)
- Refer participants to page 5 of the workbook
- [A Personal Call to Action: Engaging with My Community Worksheet](#) (page 12 of the workbook)

Overview

MS can be isolating, but you don't have to let that happen. Research shows connections are core to happiness for coping, friendship, support and more. Instead of turning inward or allowing themselves to become isolated, the most successful people hold on tighter to their social support - or even reach out. So, at the time when you need support the most, don't make a common mistake: don't let go of social support. It's your most valuable resource and investment.

Social connections do not always mean family members and what we traditionally see as friendships. Important connections can also be made with people you share an interest or common activity with - such as people you see at your exercise class, members of an online community you frequent, co-workers, etc.

Talking points

- Social relationships are the greatest single investment we can make.
- A common mistake: at the time when we need one another most, we let go of our most valuable resource: social support.
- The most successful people take the exact opposite approach. Instead of turning inward they hold on tighter to their social support.
- MS can be isolating. It is important to make sure that doesn't happen.
- Research shows connections are core to happiness (for coping, friendship and support).

Discussion questions

- Do you feel you have isolated yourself because of your MS?
- Can you identify personal relationships you'd like to strengthen or people with whom you'd like to reconnect?

Action steps

- Create actions plans using page 12 of the [workbook](#) as a model.

PRINCIPLE 3: ADJUSTING OUR MINDSET = THE FULCRUM & THE LEVER

Tools

- The Fulcrum & the Lever Video ([video – 4 minutes](#))
- [Adjusting Our Mindset webpage](#)
- Refer participants to page 6 of the workbook
- [SMART goal setting worksheet](#) and/or page 13 of the [workbook](#)



Overview

According to Shawn Achor, author of the Happiness Advantage, our brains operate according to the Archimedean formula. Two important factors give us the power to maximize our brain potential:

- The length of our lever: how much potential power and possibility we believe we have
- The position of our fulcrum: the mindset with which we generate the power to change

You've probably heard about the placebo effect: the tendency of any medication or treatment, even an inert or ineffective one, to produce results simply because the recipient believes that it will work. Research has shown how powerful the placebo effect can be. According to empirical reviews of placebo studies, 55-60% of placebos are as effective as most active medications.

Biologically speaking, the expectation of an event causes the same complex set of neurons to fire as if the event was actually occurring. This triggers events in the nervous system causing real physical consequences. In essence, beliefs can produce real results. What if we applied the placebo effect to our everyday thinking? What if we challenged our beliefs of what we can actually accomplish? **Changing your mindset can be the start of real changes in your life.**

Talking points

- We can't change reality through sheer force of will alone. We can use our brain to change how we process (think about/react to) the world and that, in turn, changes how we react to it.
- Our brains are organized to act on what we predict will happen; you get what you perceive.

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- The fulcrum = mindset = center point. By shifting this center point we can change our perceptions and, therefore, the outcomes.
- This is the time to call upon your strengths to help move the fulcrum.

Discussion questions

- Take a moment and think about goals you've set for yourself that you'd like to see progress on. Maybe you'd really like to increase your physical activity but never thought you could. Or perhaps you'd like to find ways to spend more quality time with your children. What are the top strengths you can build on?
- How can you use your strengths to change your perceptions and get things accomplished?

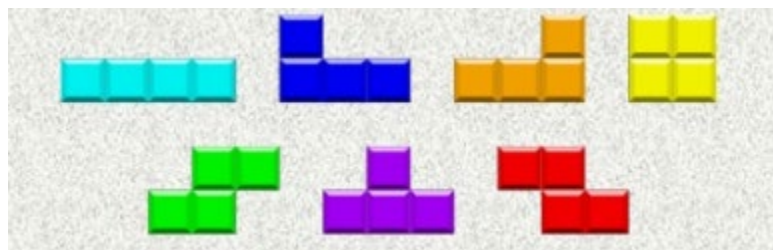
Action steps

- Use this [worksheet](#) to explore how you can change your mindset and make progress on your goals.

PRINCIPLE 4: IDENTIFYING PATTERNS OF POSSIBILITY = TETRIS EFFECT

Tools

- The Tetris Effect Video ([video – 2 minutes](#))
- [Tetris Effect webpage](#)
- Refer participants to page 7 of the workbook



Overview

Tetris® is the puzzle video game that embraces the desire to create order out of chaos. We can apply the concept of creating order out of chaos by using our mind to create and affirm the daily experiences we want to live.

Ever played Tetris for a while? (Note to facilitator: you or a group member may need to explain what the Tetris video game is) When you're done, you see shapes everywhere. This is because our brains easily get stuck in repetitious patterns of viewing things. When we are always looking for the negative, we get the negative.

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We can retrain our brain to scan for good things, even when faced with the challenges of MS. Instead of creating a pattern that looks for negatives and blocks our wellbeing, flip the switch. Scan the world for opportunities and ideas that allow wellbeing to grow. When our brains scan for and focus on the positive, we benefit from three valuable tools:

- **Happiness** - the more we focus on things that make us happy, the better we feel.
- **Gratitude** - the more opportunities for positivity we see, the more grateful we become.
- **Optimism** - the more our brain picks up on the positive, the more we expect it will continue.

Talking points

- Our brains easily get stuck in repetitious patterns of viewing the world. So, when we are always looking for the negative, we get the negative.
- Think of those “Yes, but...” people you know – they always focus on what won’t work even when presented with positive, viable options.
- We need to retrain our brain to scan for good things.
- Instead of creating a pattern that looks for negatives and blocks success, flip the switch and scan the world for opportunities and ideas that allow success to grow.
- When our brains scan for and focus on the positive, we benefit from three of the most important tools available to us:
 - Happiness – the more you focus on the things that make you happy, the better you feel.
 - Gratitude – the more opportunities for positivity we see, the more grateful we become.
 - Optimism – the more the brain picks up on the positive, the more we expect it will continue.

Discussion questions

- Do you take time to focus on the positive things that happen during your day or do you prescribe to negative thought patterns?
- What are ways you can focus on or substitute positive patterns - like having a positive lens or looking at the glass as half full?

Action steps

- Make a commitment to think of three positive things and write them down every day for a week. See if you start to naturally focus on more positives.

PRINCIPLE 5: SUCCESS THROUGH RESILIENCY = FALLING UP

Tools

- Falling Up Video ([video – 2 minutes](#))
- [Success Through Resilience webpage](#)
- Refer participants to page 8 of the workbook
- [Worksheet](#) of the ABCD process and how to change perception

Overview

The human spirit is more resilient than we realize. Challenges and setbacks are opportunities for growth - we can use them to our advantage. It all comes down to what we make of the situation.

Traumatic experiences can lead to positive growth. Do not define yourself by your MS; define yourself by what you can make out of the changes it has brought to your life.

Positive growth can take many forms including:

- An increase in spirituality
- An increase in compassion for others
- Openness

Part of being resilient is changing how one perceives adversity.

Changing one's perception relies on developing insight: your ability to recognize your beliefs about the cause(s) of adversity, and to understand how that may affect your emotions and behavior. Once you have this insight, you can see things as they are. You can put adversity in perspective without being influenced by fear or other emotions. Then you can avoid catastrophic thinking and other unhelpful mindsets such as tunnel vision (focusing on just one aspect, rather than the whole picture, of a situation) or personalizing (attributing an adverse event to your own personality or actions).

Psychologists outline the process for changing your perception of adversity as ABCD:

- **Adversity:** Events in our lives that we can't change.
- **Belief:** Our interpretation of the event, including why we think it happened, and whether we think it's temporary or permanent.
- **Consequence:** How we act and feel as a result of the event or our belief.
- **Disputation:** We acknowledge our belief as a belief (not a fact) and then challenge it by looking for other possible explanations.



Developing a “counter fact” - a new way of framing the event - can help us feel fortunate rather than helpless. To develop your counter fact, it may be helpful to pretend you’re arguing with a friend about it.

Talking points

- The human spirit is more resilient than we realize.
- For many of us, we need to go down before we go up and rebound from negative events.
- Challenges and setbacks are opportunities for growth (we can use them to our advantage) – it all comes down to what we make of the situation.
- Traumatic experiences can lead to positive growth.
- Define yourself by what you can make out of what has happened; do not define personal happiness by it.
- Positive growth can take many forms including:
 - An increase in spirituality
 - An increase in compassion for others
 - Openness

Discussion questions

- What have you learned from having MS that has made you a better or stronger person?
- Have you grown stronger as a result of a traumatic experience?
- What is your definition of PPG “personal positive growth”?

Action steps

- Start a journal summarizing a challenging experience and how you increased your resilience. Refer to your journal throughout your journey to remind yourself you can bounce back from life’s difficulties.

PRINCIPLE 6: BUILDING OUT FROM A SMALLER CENTER = THE ZORRO CIRCLE

Tools

- The Zorro Circle video ([video – 3 minutes](#))
- [The Zorro Circle webpage](#)
- Refer participants to page 9 of the workbook
- [Worksheet](#) to apply the Zorro Circle concept and increase success

Overview

Zorro is a popular fictional character, known for fighting villains and making a signature “Z” with his sword. Yet, Zorro didn’t start out as the smooth and confident hero we know him to be. A wise training master taught Zorro to develop his skills by drawing a circle in the sand around himself, and practice his sword fighting only within that circle until he was proficient. In the same way, we can make small circles with our mind and pen, to successfully accomplish goals by breaking them into small steps. Small successes can add up to major achievements—and it starts with drawing that first circle in the sand.

Often, we set big goals, like New Year’s resolutions, which are very hard to meet, like “I will lose 5 pounds in one month” or “I will read all of the great novels this year.” The vastness of these goals can feel paralyzing. By breaking big goals down into smaller, realistic steps, it becomes easier to succeed. This helps us build our confidence, celebrate forward progress and keeps us committed to the task at hand.

Talking points

- Often, we are very lofty and grand in making goals – think New Year’s resolutions.
- The vastness of the goal can be paralyzing, but by chunking out the big, overall goal into smaller, supportive goals, it becomes easier to reach the overall goal. This kind of manageable goal setting is ultimately more successful and empowering.
- Feeling more in control is one of the strongest drivers of well-being and performance.
- Setting smaller, more manageable goals helps us build our confidence, celebrate our forward progress, and keeps us committed to the task at hand.
- Small successes can add up to major achievements. All it takes is drawing that first circle in the sand.

Discussion questions

- Think about a problem or challenge that feels overwhelming to you. What might be the first step to break it down into smaller, more manageable parts?
- Have you attempted to set goals in the past (large or small)? What was the result?

Action steps

- Use this [worksheet](#) to apply the Zorro Circle concept and increase success.

PRINCIPLE 7: THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE = THE 20-SECOND RULE

Tools

- The 20-Second Rule Video ([video – 2 minutes](#))
- [The Path of Least Resistance webpage](#)
- Refer participants to page 10 of the workbook

Overview

Lowering the barrier to making a change (AKA the “activation energy”) by just 20 seconds can help you begin a new (healthy!) habit. The more we reduce, or even eliminate, the energy required to activate our desires, the more easily we can start positive change. Limiting the choices we have to make also helps lower the barrier to positive change. The less energy it takes to kick start a positive habit, the more likely the habit will stick.

Forming a habit doesn’t happen overnight. It takes persistence, so be patient. Think of something you’ve wanted to do and identify the barriers that keep you from it. Now choose one of those barriers and reduce or eliminate it. With less activation energy required, you can really get started.

Talking points

- Willpower is ineffective at sustaining change. The more we use it, the more worn-out it gets.
- Lowering the barrier to change (aka the activation energy) by just 20 seconds is all it takes to begin a new habit.
- The more we lower, or even eliminate, the activation energy for our desired actions, the more we enhance our ability to jumpstart positive change, particularly given the energy demands of MS and common symptom of fatigue.
- The 20-Second Rule isn’t just about altering the time it takes to do things. Limiting the choices we have to make also helps lower the barrier to positive change.
- The less energy it takes to kick start a positive habit, the more likely the habit will stick.
- It takes 21 days to form a habit (you don’t learn to juggle or play guitar overnight), so please be patient.

Discussion questions

- Identify a change you desire to make, or a goal you desire to achieve. Is there anything you can do to help jumpstart something you want to do?



- Can you think of a negative habit that is on your priority list to change?
- What, if anything, prevents you from taking steps to “positive changes”?

Action steps

- Using an identified change from the questions above, identify a small action you can implement over the next 21 days.

Section Three: Discussion Wrap-Up

FOR ALL DISCUSSIONS: RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Books

- *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* by Martin Seligman, PhD (2003)
- *The Happiness Advantage* by Shawn Achor (2010)

Online

- everydayMSmatters.org
- [Workbook and select resources](#) to learn more about positive psychology
- The Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania (<https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/>)
- Authentic Happiness Resource Projects (<https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/>)
- <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-positive-psychology-2794902> was the challenge and solution?

SURVEYS

Encourage members to complete the online survey. Feedback is important to the Society and helps make program delivery decisions.

- [English](#)
- [Spanish](#)



FOR DISCUSSIONS THAT TOOK PLACE OVER THE COURSE OF SEVERAL MEETINGS: KEEPING THE MOMENTUM GOING – THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Tools

- The Journey Video ([video – 4 minutes](#))
- [Keep the Momentum Going webpage](#)

Overview

Once you start using the principles of positive psychology, the positive changes quickly stack up. Being happier in your own life can be an effective tool for spreading positivity — even helping each person around us be positive too. This ripple effect can have positive benefits for friends and family members who are also living with the challenges MS can bring.

Positive emotions are infectious. Make them a powerful tool in your interpersonal relations. The happier everyone is around you, the happier you will become — and vice versa.

Talking Points

Once we start capitalizing on the principles of positive psychology, the positive changes quickly ripple out.

- Practicing the principles of positive psychology in our own lives can become our most effective tool for spreading positivity and ensuring that each person around us is spreading positivity too.
- The principles of positive psychology can have positive benefits for family members who are also living with the challenges MS can bring.
- Positive emotions are infectious, making them a powerful tool in our interpersonal relations.
- The happier everyone is around you, the happier you will become – and vice versa.

Discussion questions

- What principles of positive psychology seem easy or difficult for you to practice personally?
- What will help you keep the momentum going?
- How do you plan to share what you learned about positive psychology with others in your support circle?



Action steps

- Start your own ripple effect and reach out. Write a two-minute positive email or note, or leave a voicemail praising or thanking a family member or someone in your social circle.