

Self-Permission and Well-Being:

Self-Permission as a “Key” to Flourishing in Therapy and Positive Interventions

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Advisor: Tayyab Rashid, Ph.D.

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### Abstract

Almost all people want well-being and happiness. However, many individuals may not allow themselves to attend to their personal well-being or feel guilty when doing so. An increased understanding of this resistance and strategies to overcome it can greatly benefit the field of positive psychology. The usefulness of tools and interventions that promote flourishing—the application of positive psychology—depends on people giving themselves permission to use these tools. Building on Rose’s (2014) work, self-permission is conceptualized as the degree to which a person allows themselves to attend to personal well-being and to lead a fulfilling life. This paper introduces self-permission as a psychological process that is key in the pursuit of well-being, specifically within a positive psychotherapy context, and more generally when people engage in positive interventions. Topics affiliated with self-permission and potential cultural and psychological barriers to self-permission are discussed in this paper. A revised self-permission scale, directions for future research, and three interventions to increase self-permission are proposed. An improved understanding of self-permission can support positive psychology’s ultimate mission of promoting human flourishing on a broad scale.

*Keywords:* self-permission, positive psychology, psychotherapy, clinical psychology, positive psychotherapy, positive interventions, well-being, flourishing

This capstone is dedicated to Milla, my youngest sister.

*May you flourish!*

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*Tusen hjertelig takk for alt!*



## Preface

The initial idea for this capstone came to me on a rainy fall evening in New York City. I was walking home from the subway while discussing positive psychology with a good friend on the phone, a conversation that set me down the path of this project. My friend asked me: “Why don’t I think I deserve to be happy? Why can’t I allow myself to take care of my well-being?”

Our research methods professor Angela Duckworth emphasized the notion that “all research is me-search,” and indeed, this project was inspired by personal experiences. Observations I made of people in my life—including friends, family, classmates, colleagues, teachers, and students—triggered my curiosity for understanding the tendency I noticed of people not fully permitting themselves to pursue well-being and/or feeling guilty when doing so. This tendency is what I call low self-permission.

From childhood, humans are socialized into seeking permission in various contexts. A child is taught to seek parental permission to do a variety of activities, from playing, exploring places, or handling objects such as appliances, and student is taught to seek permission before speaking in class. A citizen may need permission to do certain tasks ranging from parking at a specific place or participating in civic discourse, and needs permission in form of licenses, permits, certificates, to perform specific professional endeavors.

As we grow into adults, we become responsible for our own well-being. In this paper, I hypothesize that the person some people need permission from in order to allow themselves to live a good life, to pursue those things in life they truly cherish, and to practice self-care, may actually be their own selves. Additionally, I hypothesize that for some people the psychological process of granting self-permission can function as a “key” to the pursuit of flourishing and well-being. Self-permission might be a psychological process that can mitigate resistance to attending

to well-being, moving people from being “stuck in a rut” and into intentional action, for example by engaging in positive interventions and allowing themselves to reap the psychological benefits of these activities.

This capstone is my initial attempt—a first “stepping stone”—in the investigation of how people might overcome the barrier of low self-permission to seeking whole-person well-being and living a fulfilled life, specifically within a therapy context, and more generally when people engage in positive interventions. My long-term goal is that the topic of self-permission and strategies to enhance people’s levels of self-permission can support positive psychology’s ultimate mission of promoting broad human flourishing.

Soon I will have earned a master’s degree in applied positive psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. Going into the next chapter of my life as a MAPP graduate, I feel a strong sense of purpose and connection. I am excited to continue fueling my curiosity and love of learning with new knowledge, applying and sharing my insights, supporting other people in enhancing their well-being, and evolving as a positive psychology practitioner in the years to come.

## Introduction

Most people wish to flourish and lead a fulfilling life; to “be happy.” Numerous theories about happiness have been discussed throughout recorded history (McMahon, 2018). About 2,400 years ago, the Greek Philosopher Aristotle asserted that all human behavior is directed in the pursuit of *eudaimonia*, well-being or flourishing (Melchert, 2002). More recently, the American philosopher and psychologist William James (1902, p. 78) regarded “happiness” as “human life's chief concern,” and the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama offers that “the main goal of life is happiness” (Ricard, 2011, p. 274). When Bonnie Ware (2012), an Australian palliative care nurse, recorded regrets people had at the end of their lives, she found that “I wish that I had let myself be happier” was among the most common regrets people contemplated while on their death beds.

According to the U.S. *Declaration of Independence* (U.S., 1776, par. 2), “the pursuit of happiness” is an “unalienable” human right given to all people by “their creator.” Empirically supported well-being resources and positive interventions that can support people in this pursuit are today plentiful and more accessible than ever before. And yet, many people may not allow themselves to take advantage of these resources and strategies or to follow the aspirations and goals that they truly cherish. For some, feeling happy is even tied with guilt.

If finding “happiness” is at the core of human motivation and the pursuit of well-being is an “unalienable” right, then why do some people experience barriers to letting themselves “pursue happiness?” Why do some people feel guilty for taking care of their well-being? Why should not people believe they are allowed, deserving or entitled to flourish?

The field of positive psychology would greatly benefit from an increased understanding of these barriers and from developing strategies to overcome them. The usefulness of tools and

interventions to allow people to flourish—the application of positive psychology—depends on people permitting themselves to engage with these tools.

This paper explores the psychological process of “letting” oneself become happier, or, more specifically, the degree to which a person gives themselves permission to attend to the various domains of their well-being and pursue a good life. Building on Rose’s (2014) work on self-permission, self-permission is conceptualized in this paper as the degree to which people allow themselves to attend to personal well-being, to follow intrinsically motivated aspirations and goals, and to lead a fulfilling life without feeling guilty for doing so.

Self-permission can be considered as a “key” to well-being. Self-permission theory, research, and applications can be valuable additions to positive psychology scholarship, particularly to the field of positive psychotherapy and positive interventions. Clinical psychologists working from the positive psychotherapy framework can increase clients’ levels of self-permission to prepare them to participate in positive interventions and to allow themselves to reap the benefits of therapy. More generally, self-permission can prime individuals to participate in positive interventions.

This paper begins with an introduction to the field of positive psychology and its applications. Next, the theoretical and scientific bases of self-permission, including affiliated terms and hypothesized cultural, social, and psychological barriers to self-permission are explored. Then, a revised self-permission scale, directions for future research, and three self-permission interventions are proposed. Ultimately, this paper hypothesizes that an improved understanding of self-permission can greatly benefit the field of positive psychology.

## **Introduction to Positive Psychology and Its Applications**

### **What is Positive Psychology?**

Positive psychology is the science of human flourishing and the study of what makes life worth living (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The discipline involves theory, research, and applications of the factors that enable individuals, organizations, and communities to thrive.

These factors include meaning and purpose, engagement, positive emotions and individual experiences, character strengths and virtues, resilience, accomplishments, enabling institutions, and healthy relationships (Peterson, 2006; Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology attempts to foster conditions that help people to live fulfilling and meaningful lives and support human flourishing on a broad scale (Seligman, 2011).

Martin “Marty” E. P. Seligman and colleagues coalesced concepts and applications that make life worth living under the term positive psychology when Seligman became president of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1998 (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). After a long career studying and teaching about psychopathology, depression, and helplessness (Seligman, 2018), Seligman came to see the contemporary field of psychology as “half-baked” with its dominating focus on mental illness and psychological frailties (Gillham & Seligman, 1999, p. 172). However, while treatment of debilitating factors such as symptoms of mental illness and trauma is a vital *part* of enhancing well-being, absence of such factors does not necessarily equate “happiness” or flourishing. Positive psychology offers the perspective that in addition to mitigating pathology and psychological weaknesses, it is equally important to take a constructive approach to human well-being by cultivating strengths and nurturing what is good (Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A fundamental positive psychology principle is that well-being is as essential and authentic to the human experience as is suffering

and mental illness (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Positive psychology is thus a complement, and not a replacement, to traditional psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Though positive psychology is a relatively young field, its roots are found in ancient wisdom and philosophy (Seligman, 2011), as are the roots of psychology in general (Weiten, 2014). Humans have inquired about and formulated theories on the meaning of life, the pursuit of well-being, and what constitutes “the good life” for thousands of years (McMahon, 2018). When psychology first became a distinct field relying on scientific research methods in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century (Weiten, 2014), psychology had three missions: 1) to treat mental illness, 2) to make people’s lives more fulfilling and meaningful, and 3) to identify and foster high potential (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, after World War II, Western psychology primarily focused on mental illness and how to cure it while the two other missions were not prioritized (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Psychology research primarily focused on psychological disorders, trauma, and abuse. For example, from 1967 to 1998 there were about twenty-one published articles on negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety and depression, for each published article on positive emotions, such as joy, gratitude, and love (Gillham & Seligman, 1999). Moreover, the little research on well-being from this period tended to be philosophical and not experimental. Positive psychology emerged in the late nineties as a reaction to the dominating focus on illness as several psychologists and researchers, particularly in the field of humanistic psychology, called for an increased focus on the positive aspects of life (Gillham & Seligman, 1999; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology evolves philosophical well-being theories and humanistic psychology by using empirical research methods to systematically study human flourishing.

Since the founding of positive psychology some twenty years ago, the field's research, theories, and applications have grown rapidly (Rusk & Waters, 2013). Today, positive psychology benefits millions of people across the world in a variety of populations—both clinical and non-clinical. All over the globe, researchers study human flourishing, special journals are dedicated to publishing findings from this research, and positive psychology conferences and summits are held every year (Pawelski, 2016). In addition, certification programs and graduate programs have emerged to educate new positive psychology practitioners who apply their expertise in a variety of fields, including education, business, the arts and humanities, politics, law, coaching, consulting, medicine, and clinical psychology (Seligman, 2011). This paper proposes the idea that an increased understanding of self-permission can greatly benefit positive psychology theory, research, and practice and support positive psychology's mission of promoting human flourishing on a broad scale.

### **Well-Being and Voluntary Activity**

One of the main ideas that positive psychology offers is the awareness that subjective well-being is under the individual's control to a significant degree. William James (1890) famously said, "my experience is what I agree to attend to" (p. 402). In line with this idea, several psychologists have found that humans have the agency to make significant improvements of their personal well-being through intentional changes in their mindset, actions, and attention. Building on Seligman (2002) and Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade's (2005) work, Jonathan Haidt (2006) proposes a well-being equation, or happiness formula: " $H = S + C + V$ " (p. 91). H stands for happiness or individual well-being, S for biological setpoint, C for circumstances or life conditions, and V for voluntary activity. In other words, an individual's well-being is a combination of the person's genes, circumstances, and activity. Circumstances include both

changeable factors (e.g. financial resources, relationship status) and unchangeable factors (e.g. race/ethnicity). Voluntary activity refers to chosen behaviors and mental processes, such as physical exercise or establishing a daily meditation practice. Recognizing that some people are more genetically inclined to have a higher well-being than others (e.g. not having a genetic inclination for anxiety) and that some people are privileged with life circumstances that are more supportive of well-being than other people do (e.g. having financial safety and a loving family), a person's well-being can still be significantly enhanced through voluntary activity if they give themselves permission to engage in this activity. The understanding that humans have agency to enhance their well-being through chosen activities is experienced as empowering for many people (Seligman, 2011). Psychologists develop positive interventions so people intentionally can enhance their well-being through voluntary activity.

### **Positive Interventions**

The field of positive psychology offers positive interventions: evidence-based strategies for how individuals effectively might direct their attention and behavior to intentionally increase well-being and flourishing. Positive interventions include keeping a “three good things” gratitude journal, performing random acts of kindness, and using signature strengths in new ways (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). A meta-analysis of 51 positive interventions with a sample size of 4,266 subjects provides evidence that positive interventions indeed are effective in significantly enhancing intervention participants' well-being and amending symptoms of depression (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). These findings are promising for the inclusion of positive interventions in clinical therapy. Positive interventions are likely to be more effective when there is a person-activity fit, that is, when a person engages in interventions that align with individual characteristics and modifies the way the intervention is carried out to fit personal



preferences (Schueller, 2014). This paper hypothesizes that for many people, the psychological process of granting self-permission to engage in positive intervention is a prerequisite for intervention participation. Many positive interventions increase well-being by focusing on enhancing the elements in Seligman's (2011) well-being theory PERMA.

### **Well-Being Theory and PERMA**

Seligman (2011) emphasizes that positive psychology is not a "happiology;" the field constitutes a broader scope than a science of "happiness." Rather, positive psychology is a science of well-being. Although the words happiness, well-being, and flourishing are sometimes used interchangeably in psychology literature, "happiness" is about momentary positive affect and well-being is about satisfaction with life over time (Prilleltensky, 2016). Acknowledged well-being theories are multidimensional and include personal growth, optimal functioning, fulfillment, meaning and purpose, connections to other people, positive evaluations of one's life, and the whole spectrum of human emotions from negative to positive affect. Tal Ben-Shahar, a distinguished teacher of positive psychology, refers to humans as "whole-beings" recognizing that people are complex and multifaceted (T. Ben-Shahar, personal communication, October 28, 2018). Therefore, people should give a balanced attention to various well-being domains to experience "whole person well-being." Moreover, positive psychology researchers emphasize that a person cannot pursue well-being *directly*, instead they must pursue it *indirectly* through enhancing the various elements that together constitute whole-person well-being. Diener and Seligman (2002) write that "high happiness seems to be like beautiful symphonic music—necessitating many instruments, without any one being sufficient for the beautiful quality" (p. 83).

While there are several recognized theories about which elements belong in a comprehensive well-being model (e.g. Prilleltensky et al., 2015; Ryff, 1989), Seligman's (2011) theory PERMA makes a significant contribution to positive psychology scholarship. PERMA is an acronym for five well-being elements, namely, positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments (Seligman, 2011). Positive emotions are the emotional states people usually refer to when they say they feel "happy"—pleasant emotions such as gratitude, awe, joy, serenity, pride, inspiration and the like (Fredrickson, 1998, 2009). Though negative emotions such as fear, sadness and anger can be adaptive in certain situations, research suggest that cultivating a healthy positivity ratio of more positive to negative emotions facilitates well-being (Fredrickson, 2013). According to Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions build people's psychological and social resources and broaden their attention spans. Engagement is a sense of being involved and immersed in your life; what people often describe as being "in the zone" (Peterson, 2006; Seligman, 2011) or experiencing "flow," a state people can enter when challenge meets their skill at a high level and it feels as though time stops (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). One way to experience engagement is through awareness, exploration, and application of signature strengths, the character strengths that are particularly central to a person's identity (Niemic, 2018). Relationships refer to the interpersonal attachments between people. Humans are hyper-social animals biologically programmed to connect, cooperate, befriend, and love (Peterson, 2006) and people's well-being and life satisfaction are directly tied to the quality of their close relationships (Diener & Seligman, 2002). To be well, it is essential to nourish relationships with other people. Meaning refers to an individual's sense of being part of something larger than the self, such as feeling a sense of belonging to a group, feeling connected to a higher power, or feeling that your life has a purpose (Seligman, 2011; Smith, 2017). Finally,

accomplishments are about winning, mastery, and reaching goals; feeling that one is *good* at something and experiencing a sense of achievement (Seligman, 2011).

Emiliya Zhivotovskaya has built on Seligman's PERMA model to include vitality: PERMA-V (O'Brien, 2014). This well-being model acknowledges the importance of physical well-being. The mind-body connection is the notion that our cognitive processes and our physical body are closely linked and influence each other. For example, physical activity is linked with boosts in positive affect, improved resilience to stress, reduced anxiety, and enhanced quality of life (Faulkner Hefferon, & Mutrie, 2015) as well as improved brain functioning and mental performance (Ratey & Hagerman, 2008). Shusterman (2006) takes the discussion of the mind-body connection to another level, conceptualizing the mind and body as so intimately connected to each other that they are in fact united as the *body-mind*. Shusterman (2006) argues that our body is the essential aspect of what makes us human—we think, feel, and experience the world through our body. Considering the link between physical well-being and mental well-being (Faulkner et al., 2015; Ratey & Hagerman, 2008), a human flourishing model that did not include physical well-being/vitality would not be “fully baked,” and would not encompass “whole-person well-being.”

Research supports the notion that people can enhance well-being through intentional activity that attends to the various PERMA-V elements. Thus, positive psychology practitioners, including clinical psychologists, can help people flourish through “filling” their personal PERMA-V “buckets.” It is important to note that exactly *what* can boost the various PERMA-V elements is individual—all humans have a unique “well-being recipe.” Therefore, part of the pursuit of well-being can be an ongoing process of cultivating self-awareness, learning about positive psychology and its application, and identifying the activities that give the individual a

sense of meaning, positive emotions, achievement, and so on. This paper hypothesizes that the psychological process of *allowing* oneself to do these activities—granting self-permission—is an important foundational step that might be necessary *before* a person can attend to personal “PERMA-V buckets.” For some people, particularly people who have mental illnesses, this process might be most supportive within a therapy context.

### **Positive Psychotherapy**

For over a century, the field of clinical psychology and psychotherapy has primarily taken a mitigative approach to well-being, meaning that its main focus has been on fixing, getting rid of, and repairing psychological weaknesses and mental illness (Rashid, 2015; Rashid & Seligman, 2018). Though traditional psychotherapy may help clients feel less depressed or anxious by “fixing” what is “wrong,” enhancing the client’s well-being above “functional” and cultivating character strengths is not always a main therapeutic goal in this mitigative approach. Positive psychotherapy (PPT) developed as an alternative to this approach. PPT is a relatively new approach to psychotherapy in which therapists operate from a strength-based and positive psychology informed framework (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005; Rashid, 2015; Rashid & Seligman, 2018). PPT relies on the positive psychology principle that the absence of mental illness does not necessarily equate flourishing and well-being. Positive psychotherapists aim to amplify their clients’ strengths, elements of PERMA, and positive habits and skills *in addition* to treating clients’ mental health problems, debilitating emotions, and unhelpful behavior patterns. Therapists working within the PPT framework will encourage clients to fully acknowledge, value, and savor what is good, what gives them meaning, and what is going right in their lives and to cultivate more of these strengths and positive qualities without invalidating the negative emotions or minimizing the distress they might be experiencing (Duckworth et al., 2005; Rashid

& Seligman, 2018). Essentially, PPT appreciates “the wholeness of the human experience” (T. Rashid, personal communication, November 18, 2018).

PPT includes assessing a client’s character strengths as well as psychopathology symptoms and evaluating the client’s history of mental illness, acknowledging each client as a complex human being with positive qualities and resources as well as serious psychological challenges. A significant part of PPT is inviting clients to participate in positive interventions, such as writing forgiveness letters, engaging in post-traumatic growth exercises, and performing random acts of kindness, as well as teaching clients concrete, applicable, personally and culturally relevant skills and strategies to cope with their challenges (Rashid, 2015; Rashid & Seligman, 2018). Positive psychotherapy is often driven by inquiry, asking clients questions such as “what gives you meaning?” and “which resources have helped you overcome obstacles in your life?”

In their book *Positive Psychotherapy: Clinician Manual*, Seligman and Rashid (2018) summarize theory and research on PPT and outline fifteen PPT sessions with positive interventions centered around the domains of PERMA that clinicians can use when working with clients. Seligman and Rashid’s vision for the manual is to describe the “transformative process” where growing clients’ positive emotions, character strengths, meaning, purpose, and healthy relationships and encouraging clients to pursue intrinsically motivated goals are “central to the way clients, as well as clinicians, heal and grow” (p. IX).

Research on the effectiveness of PPT provides encouraging results for various psychological illnesses (phobia being a notable exception). Several randomized controlled studies have shown that PPT—both individual and group therapy—decreases levels of

depression and increases life satisfaction (e.g. Asgharipoor, Farid, Arshadi, & Sahebi, 2012; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006).

An important challenge to therapeutic outcomes is resistance (e.g. Mitchell & Black, 2016). There are many other reasons why a person might experience resistance to therapy: they might not believe in therapy, they might feel overwhelmed by negative emotions and anxiety, or they might experience resistance because of low self-permission. Therapy is not easy; it might require resources from the client such as mental energy, time, and money. People low in self-permission might need to engage in the psychological process of granting themselves permission to spend the resources that the therapeutic process might require in service of their well-being.

### **Self-Permission and the Pursuit of Well-Being**

#### **Defining Self-Permission**

In this paper, self-permission is conceptualized as *the degree to which a person allows themselves to attend to their personal well-being and lead a fulfilling life*. This includes, but is not limited to allowing oneself the time to do activities just for enjoyment (e.g. playing cards with friends), participate in positive interventions (e.g. identify, explore, and apply signature strengths), practice self-care (e.g. allow oneself enough sleep and rest), pursue intrinsically motivated goals, short-term or long-term (e.g. choose the field of study or career that one feels most passionate about), and to enjoy a good life without feeling guilty. Self-permission is conceptualized as a continuous variable, that is, one can have self-permission to a higher and lesser extent and a person's level of self-permission can vary in different life domains and well-being aspects.

Self-permission is a word used not only in the mainstream US wellness industry and in non-empirical self-help books, articles, TED talks, and blog posts, but also in academic positive

psychology contexts. In University of Pennsylvania's Master of Applied Positive Psychology program, instructors often reference self-permission in their lectures when priming individuals to engage in positive interventions. For example, Penn's Chief Wellness Officer Dr. Benoit Dube's initiatives to enhance student well-being at the university are focused on encouraging students to "give themselves permission" to take advantage of the various well-being offerings at Penn (B. Dube, personal communication, March 29, 2019). He has observed that Penn students in general are extremely hard-working and tend to focus on academic success, the A in PERMA, which often can come at a cost to the other PERMA elements, such as their social relationships and positive emotions. Further, James Pawelski encourages his master students in applied positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania to give themselves permission to engage with the arts and humanities for the eudaimonic value of these activities (J. Pawelski, personal communication, January 11, 2019). While self-permission is frequently mentioned in these contexts, self-permission has not to date been investigated systematically in an empirical setting. The proposed self-permission scale, research, and self-permission interventions in this paper could begin to fill this gap in the positive psychology literature.

Rose (2014) proposes a theoretical framework and assessment for self-permission. Rose's focus is on self-permission to pursue life goals, studying this topic from a coaching lens. His capstone paper includes a fourteen-item scale he developed to measure a person's degree of self-permission. Building on his work, this paper investigates the topic of self-permission to pursue well-being with a focus on the PERMA-V framework specifically in a PPT setting, and generally in the context of engaging in positive interventions in the non-clinical population. The paper also proposes a revision of Rose's self-permission scale (SPS). Next, theoretical frameworks and ideas affiliated with self-permission are explored.

### **Theoretical Frameworks Affiliated with Self-Permission**

**Self-Compassion.** Self-compassion is a way to relate to the suffering and adversity that are inevitable parts of being human. Self-compassion researcher and advocate Kristin Neff (2011) proposes that self-compassion consists of three elements: 1) self-kindness, 2) common humanity, and 3) mindfulness. Self-kindness is about directing warmth and understanding toward the self when facing adversity. It is treating oneself with the care and kindness that one would treat a dear friend with, engaging in positive and supportive self-talk as opposed to self-criticism (Neff, 2011). Common humanity is having the understanding that suffering and adversity are part of the shared human experience, that you are not alone in your suffering, and that all humans are imperfect and have imperfect lives. Having a mindset of common humanity might support people in feeling connected rather than isolated during difficult times (Neff, 2011). Mindfulness is commonly defined as the awareness that arises when a person intentionally attends to the present moment without judgement (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Smalley & Winston, 2010). More specifically, mindfulness asks for non-judgmental self-awareness of either the current experience or the emotional reactions to adversity and personal failures (Neff, 2011; Neff & Davidson, 2016). Self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness come together and interact with each other to create a self-compassionate mindset; what Neff and Germer (2017) describe as a "loving connected presence" (p.10).

A common misconception about self-compassion is that being self-compassionate is the same as being overly "soft" on the self and will lead to laziness. In fact, research on self-compassion shows that the opposite is true: while self-criticism is detrimental for motivation and psychological well-being, self-compassion can boost motivation, well-being, and performance. Research shows that a self-compassionate frame of mind is associated with higher well-being



and positive psychological functioning (e.g. Neff & Costigan, 2014; Neff & Germer, 2017). Such positive psychological outcomes include reduced levels of depression, anxiety, and rumination, and increased levels of positive affect, emotional intelligence, life satisfaction, intellectual flexibility, healthy psychological responses to stress, optimism and social connectedness (Neff & Germer, 2017). Further, research shows that self-compassion is positively associated with self-care (e.g. Miller, Lee, Niu, Grise-Owens, & Bode, 2019).

Future research should explore the relationship between self-compassion and self-permission. This paper hypothesizes that there is a positive correlation between a person's levels of self-compassion and self-permission. Yet, these psychological constructs are different from each other as self-permission might come before self-compassion; one might need to give oneself permission to be kind to oneself, to connect with others, and to practice mindfulness. Thus, self-permission might function as a key to self-compassion.

**The permission to be human.** Ben-Shahar promotes the concept of “the permission to be human,” which is giving yourself permission to experience the full spectrum of human emotions, from positive to negative (T. Ben-Shahar, personal communication, October 28, 2018). Ben-Shahar emphasizes that experiencing negative emotions is an authentic part of the human experience and that when people “allow the unhappiness in” they can really open themselves up to happiness. Therefore, Ben-Shahar sees the permission to be human as a main pillar of whole-person well-being.

Ben-Shahar's concept of the permission to be human is about giving yourself permission to be sad, while self-permission is about allowing yourself to pursue well-being—whole-person well-being, which will include giving yourself the permission to be human. Permission to be human is thus a part of self-permission to pursue well-being.

**Intra-personal justice.** Prilleltensky (2016), community psychologist and author, emphasizes that fairness is a requirement for well-being. Fairness is a practice or application of justice, which is about giving people what they “deserve.” Prilleltensky (2016) proposes that people can be fair or unfair to themselves, offering the term intrapersonal justice. He further hypothesizes that being unfair to the self—the presence of intrapersonal injustice—can manifest as having a highly critical and self-deprecating internal monologue. In more extreme cases, intrapersonal injustice can manifest itself in self-punishment and self-harm behaviors, such as eating disorders and suicidality. Prilleltensky hypothesizes that intrapersonal injustice is associated with low self-worth and feeling that one does not deserve to be well. This paper predicts that individuals’ levels of self-permission and intrapersonal justice are correlated. Self-permission can potentially facilitate intrapersonal justice and support people in being fair to themselves. In other words, some people might need to go through the psychological process of granting self-permission to be fair to themselves.

**Self-determination theory.** Behaviors we genuinely want to do are autonomous in quality (Brown & Ryan, 2015). Such behaviors are also known as self-determined behaviors. Self-determined behaviors are often intrinsically motivated, that is, they are done because of an authentic interest in the action. In contrast, extrinsically motivated behaviors are done for instrumental reasons; the behavior is simply a means to an end. Brown and Ryan (2015) demonstrate the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on a continuum, suggesting that a behavior’s quality of being autonomous versus nonautonomous varies along the spectrum between these two types of motivation. Intrinsically motivated/self-determined behaviors are desirable as they are associated with greater psychological well-being. For example, having intrinsic motivation for participating in a positive intervention will likely make

the intervention more successful than if the person's motivation were extrinsic. In line with Rose's (2014) theories, this paper offers the hypothesis that a person high in self-permission is more likely to allow themselves to follow their intrinsic motivations than a person low in self-permission and vice versa.

### **Potential Barriers to Self-Permission**

#### **Cultural and Social Barriers**

As previously mentioned, humans are hyper-social animals and the need to belong is one of the strongest human needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Peterson, 2006). People constantly receive messages from the communities they are part of; messages about which behaviors are “approved” and “valued” and which are looked down upon (Prilleltensky, 2016). Rose (2014) predicts that a person's level of self-permission might be significantly influenced by the messages a person receives and whether the individual's wishes are in conflict—real or perceived—with these messages and the norms and values within the community they belong to. Does the family approve of one's life aspirations? Is caring about personal well-being valued within a person's culture? This section of the paper reviews how culture might influence a person's degree of self-permission.

**Hustle culture.** Hustle culture, also called grind culture, is a culture in which work is valued above other aspects of one's life, such as relationships and physical well-being (Griffith, 2019). It is a culture where work and achievement, the A in PERMA, is likely prioritized above everything else, and people tend to take pride in being “busy,” working long hours, not sleeping, and so on. Hustle culture might not be supportive of whole-person well-being and might be a barrier to self-permission to attend to all domains of well-being.

**Gender roles.** Gender roles within a culture might further influence people's degree of self-permission. For example, many cultures have norms of self-sacrifice for women, perhaps especially for mothers. Moreover, men are in many cultures expected to be "tough," and some men might find a sense of pride in not "needing" self-care (e.g. sufficient sleep). Thus, gender might influence a person's degree of self-permission.

**Economic and political factors.** Economic and political factors might highly influence a person's level of self-permission. For example, if a person is living in poverty or experiencing social oppression or a personal crisis like losing one's job, home, family or freedom, other needs may be more urgent and important so that survival takes precedence over pursuing well-being. Alternatively, self-permission might not be a reliable predictor of a person's well-being if the society they belong to do not allow them to realize the activities or goals they wish to pursue. For some individuals facing poverty, oppression, or experiencing lack of freedom or justice, giving self-permission to pursue personal well-being might feel unrealistic.

**Compounding cultural and social barriers.** The barriers discussed above might be further amplified when individuals experience multiple of these barriers simultaneously. For example, according to the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003), women might experience more stress than men because of gender expectations within the society, but black single mothers experience the stress of being black, of being a single parent, *and* the stress of being a woman in a patriarchal society.

### **Psychological Barriers**

**Guilt.** For some people, the pursuit of well-being and happiness is tied with guilt. There might be several reasons why a person might experience guilt for pursuing personal well-being or for feeling happy. The emotional reasoning for guilt may be that one acts below their own

perceived standards, which in turn may lower self-worth and self-esteem. People with guilt might feel that they are not “worthy” or “deserving” of well-being. Guilt might arise as the messages one receives from one’s environment become internalized, for example when one internalizes the message from hustle culture that practicing self-care is not acceptable.

**Thinking traps.** Thinking traps are, according to cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) literature, overly inflexible patterns in our thinking that may lead an individual to miss important information. Such inaccurate thinking can be harmful for the individual’s mental well-being. Thinking traps tend to arise when we jump to conclusions and take mental short cuts that cause us to miss critical information (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Most people have thinking traps in their daily lives, and they tend to come up in situations where the person feels vulnerable, there’s ambiguity, they feel depleted/fatigued, or in situations they have been in before, with certain expectations of how the turn out of such situations *should* be (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). One common thinking trap is “should-must statements.” In this thinking trap, the individual’s self-talk makes statements about what they *should* be doing in a self-critical way. Thinking traps might therefore jeopardize a person’s level of self-permission.

### **Hypotheses about Self-Permission**

This paper offers the hypothesis that higher levels of self-permission are associated with higher well-being, flourishing, and life satisfaction, and vice versa. Another hypothesis that follows is that individuals who score high on self-permission are more likely to benefit from and/or seek out therapy. Further, the paper hypothesizes that some people might be “naturally” higher in self-permission: they might intuitively feel that they deserve well-being and thus unconsciously allow themselves to attend to the various aspects of their well-being. These individuals might be lower in the personality traits neuroticism and conscientiousness. However,

other individuals might experience that they are “naturally” lower in self-permission. These individuals might be more likely to have a higher level of the personality traits neuroticism and conscientiousness. The paper hypothesizes that these individuals are more likely to benefit from and/or seek out therapy—hence the positive psychotherapy is focus on in this paper.

For individuals for whom self-permission does not feel natural, self-permission might be a psychological process that can mitigate resistance to attending to well-being and moves them from being “stuck in a rut” and into intentional action, for example by engaging in positive interventions and allowing themselves to reap the psychological benefits of these interventions. Future research should systematically investigate the proposed hypotheses in an empirical setting.

### **Proposed Self-Permission Assessment, Research, and Applications**

#### **Proposed Revision of the Self-Permission Scale (SPS)**

Inspired by Rose’s (2014) self-permission scale (SPS), this paper proposes a revised version of this scale to measure people’s level of self-permission. While Rose’s scale primarily focused on self-permission to pursue goals, the proposed revision of the scale aims to measure self-permission to pursue whole-person well-being on a broader level. The revised self-permission scale can be used by practitioners and therapists to assess their clients’ degrees of self-permission and by researchers to measure self-permission in empirical studies.

The self-permission items will be rated on a scale of 1 to 7: *1: Not at all like me; 2: Not like me; 3: Somewhat not like me; 4: Neutral; 5: Somewhat like me; 6: Like me; 7: Very much like me.* The self-permission scale consists of the following items:

1. I permit myself to pursue well-being in my life.
2. I allow myself to live a life full of meaning and purpose.

3. I deserve to flourish.
4. I let myself pursue things in life that I really cherish.
5. I allow myself to live up to my potential.
6. I deserve to be happy.
7. I let myself pursue my goals with passion.
8. I allow myself to engage in activities where I feel fully immersed in what I am doing.
9. I give myself permission to follow my aspirations.
10. I allow myself to practice self-care.
11. I permit myself to nourish my relationships and spend time with people I care about.
12. I never feel guilty for taking care of my personal well-being.
13. I let myself search for meaning in my life.
14. In general, I give myself permission to lead a good life.

In addition to these items, the following open-ended qualitative question that can be added to the scale for research purposes:

*Please write your answer in the textbox.*

15. What prevents you from giving yourself permission to pursue well-being? Please list one to three barriers. (If you can't think of any, please write N/A)

### **Proposed Research on Self-Permission and Well-Being**

As has been discussed thus far in this paper, there is a gap in the positive psychology literature when it comes to self-permission research. Future research should focus on filling this gap through systematically investigating the extent to which self-permission affects well-being and ways to overcome low levels of self-permission. An important first step is to validate the proposed self-permission scale and make improvements and refinements to the items as

necessary. Once the psychometrics of the scale are established, a study is proposed which investigates correlations between people's levels of self-permission and their levels of flourishing as assessed with Rashid and Seligman's (2018) Flourishing Inventory (FI), life satisfaction using Diener and colleagues' (1985) Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), personality traits using Soto and John's (2017) Big Five Inventory-2-S, and demographics. The sample could be a nationally representative and randomly selected adults. This study could be administered through an online survey and the data can be investigated through correlational methods. The findings from this study would provide initial insights into how self-permission relates to other well-being constructs and psychosocial factors.

Subsequently, it would be beneficial to study self-permission using qualitative research methods for a deeper understanding of the underlying psychological and social factors that might influence a person's degree of self-permission. Inspired by Diener and Seligman's (2002) study of "very happy" and "very unhappy" people, it is proposed to gather sub-samples of participants from the proposed study above with the individuals who score highest and lowest in self-permission scale. Semi-structured interviews with these individuals, focused on identifying psychosocial self-permission barriers and enabling factors could provide valuable insights and a deeper understanding of which factors might facilitate self-permission and which might disrupt it.

Further, research should also investigate ways to overcome low self-permission to attend to well-being through engaging in positive interventions. An experimental research is proposed in which positive psychotherapists implement activities to enhance self-permission and compare changes in self-permission, client flourishing and therapeutic effectiveness to that of a control group. In this study, both participant groups would follow the therapy sessions outlined in Rashid



and Seligman's (2018) positive psychotherapy manual. The intervention group would have an additional initial therapy session with self-permission enhancing activities, while the control group would start the therapy as usual. Clients' levels of self-permission and flourishing (using Rashid's flourishing scale) should be assessed before, during and after the study.

These proposed studies can generate initial findings that can inform new studies as well as the development of self-permission interventions. Following this step, three positive interventions designed to enhance a person's degree of self-permission are also proposed.

### **Proposed Self-Permission Interventions**

If the proposed studies above show that self-permission is a significant mechanism for well-being, interventions that address self-permission should be developed and tested. Below, variations of existing evidence-based positive interventions tailored specifically towards increasing a person's level of self-permission to pursue well-being are proposed.

Because people may not respond in the same way to interventions due to person-to-person variability (Schueller, 2014), three different interventions aiming towards the same goal of increasing self-permission are proposed. An optional "intervention reinforcer" intended to strengthen the effect of these three interventions is also proposed. The proposed activities are flexible so the practitioner guiding their client through an intervention can tailor the interventions towards the client's individual needs and preferences.

Self-permission interventions can be used as "foundational" interventions that prime individuals to care for their well-being and participate in other positive interventions. The self-permission interventions can also be utilized at any time during the therapeutic process when the client experiences barriers such as feeling guilty or not feeling deserving of well-being. Indeed,

these interventions can be made accessible to the general public for anyone wishing to enhance one's level of self-permission to attend to personal well-being.

The interventions described have been tested among a small convenience sample ( $n=5$ ) and they have been adjusted based on the participants' reported experiences with the interventions. Future research should empirically investigate the effect of these interventions through experimental randomized placebo-controlled trials, measuring changes in levels of self-permission before and after engagement with the interventions in a variety of populations. If the interventions are indeed effective in enhancing self-permission, clinicians might systematically include these interventions in their practice. Moreover, the interventions can be made accessible to the general public providing specific self-permission enhancing tools any person who might wish to use these activities for self-exploration or personal development and intentional increasing their level of self-permission.

**Self-permission letter.** Writing is the activity in several evidence-based positive interventions, such as the “three good things” gratitude journaling, gratitude letters, and forgiveness letters (Lyubomirsky, 2008). The self-permission letter intervention is inspired by these interventions.

In this intervention, the participants will be asked to write themselves letters in which they grant self-permission to pursue well-being in their lives. First, the writing prompt invites the participants to consider which activities brings them well-being by contemplating a series of questions inspired by the PERMA framework. Then, they are encouraged to consider which of these activities they may not fully allow themselves to engage in. Finally, the participants will write themselves letters in which they give themselves permission to engage in those activities. The writing prompt recommends that the participants write in 2<sup>nd</sup> person using a compassionate

language as if they were writing to a good friend. The prompt also includes suggested phrases that the participants can use in their letters. The writing prompt emphasizes that the activity can be modified to match the participants' individual preferences: for example, the participants can choose to write a less structured text such as a list if writing a letter does not feel authentic. Participants can focus their letters on particular PERMA elements as needed. See the proposed writing prompt in appendix A.

**Self-permission meditation.** Meditation practices have gained tremendous attention over the past 30-40 years as an exponential amount of research began to document the benefits of mindfulness meditation on health and well-being, including increased positive affect, decreased stress, depression, and anxiety, and enhanced performance (Smalley & Winston, 2010). Given the amount of scientific research on the benefits of mindfulness meditation, these practices have evolved from being considered “alternative medicine” to “good medicine” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). One way to practice mindfulness meditation is through the classic loving-kindness (also called *mettā*) meditation. In this practice, the meditator visualizes people they care about, sending them warm wishes and then gradually expanding these positive emotions to include people they feel neutral about, people they might have a negative relationship with, and finally including all beings on earth. Kristin Neff has developed variations of loving-kindness meditations tailored specifically towards cultivating self-compassion.

Based on Neff's self-compassion meditations (“Guided Self-Compassion Meditations,” n.d.), a meditation script is proposed. This script is a variation of the loving-kindness meditation tailored specifically towards enhancing the person's self-permission to attend to personal well-being. The script is estimated to provide about a fifteen-minute-long meditation, though length can be adjusted to be shorter or longer if more appropriate for the client. The practitioner can

guide the client through the self-permission by reading the script or alternatively playing a recording of the script. This intervention might be most suitable for individuals who are familiar with mindfulness meditation and lovingkindness practices. See appendix B for the self-permission meditation script.

**WOOPS.** The proposed intervention WOOPS is an acronym for wish, outcome, obstacle, plan, and self-permission. This intervention is a variation of the evidence based WOOP method for habit change and goal achievement. Specifically, WOOP incorporates mental contrasting with implementation intentions (“WOOP My Life,” n.d.). When filling out a WOOP form, participants define their “wish;” that is, what they are hoping to change or accomplish. Then, they visualize and describe the very best “outcome” of this wish. Next, they list “obstacles” that might prevent them from reaching their wish and formulate a concrete “plan” to overcome these obstacles.

Pursuing well-being might include establishing new habits and/or working towards goals (e.g. meditate, journal, exercise, attend therapy), and the WOOP activity might support people in this process. The proposed WOOPS intervention is a variation of the WOOP activity tailored towards increasing self-permission to pursue the wish. People low in self-permission might benefit from the WOOPS activity, where the S stands for self-permission. The added element of self-permission invites the participant to reflect on why they deserve to experience the desirable outcome of their wish. The final step in the WOOPS process is granting self-permission to take the time to establish the new habit or work towards the desired achievement that might ultimately enhance their well-being. See appendix C for a proposed WOOPS for and an example of a filled out WOOPS form.

**Optional intervention reinforcer: Self-permission nudge.** The final proposed activity is meant as an “intervention reinforcer.” That is, it can be used as a reminder of the other self-permission interventions. A nudge is a small feature in the environment that can attract attention and influence behavior and mental processes (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). It is not “mandatory” to pay attention to nudges, but rather they are gentle suggestions that can influence human behavior and/or cognition in beneficial ways, for example by reinforcing a new habit or mindset shift. In this activity, the participant will choose a nudge that reminds them to give themselves permission to attend to their well-being. Examples of what a self-permission nudge might look like includes a picture, an image, drawing or symbol, a poem, quote, or affirmation, a written self-permission letter, a bracelet, a filled out WOOPS form, or anything else that feels as an authentic reminder to the person. The participant should choose a nudge that feels most meaningful to them and place the nudge in a spot that feels significant, such as on the bedroom wall, on the mirror, or as a screen saver on their phone. See appendix D for a proposed activity instruction for this intervention.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Self-permission is an important concept in enhancing wellbeing that is not yet deeply understood. This paper is an initial attempt in seeking this understanding. The paper explores the role of self-permission specifically in the context of positive psychotherapy, and more generally as a primer for positive interventions. It discusses affiliated terms and potential cultural and psychological barriers to self-permission, proposes a self-permission scale and research on the topic, and suggests self-permission interventions. By conducting the proposed research, testing the impact of the proposed self-permission interventions, and generating new applications based on the findings, psychologists can begin to fill the self-permission gap in positive psychology

scholarship. The paper hypothesizes that the encouragement of self-permission and strategies to enhance self-permission will allow more people to take care of their personal well-being and live fulfilling lives. Therefore, an increased understanding of self-permission can support positive psychology's ultimate mission of promoting human flourishing on a broad scale.

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## Appendix A

### Proposed Self-Permission Intervention: Self-Permission Letter Writing Prompt

Please note that the suggested self-permission letter writing prompt can be adjusted and tailored towards meeting the intervention participant's specific needs or requests. For example, if writing a letter does not feel authentic to the participant, the prompt can be used to write a list, a stream of consciousness reflection, or to use a different format that might feel more supportive to the participant. If the participant struggles with self-permission to attend to a particular PERMA-dimension, the writing prompt can be adjusted to focus on this dimension. Next, the way the self-permission letter writing activity is carried out is also flexible: for example, the intervention participants can write their own letter and keep it to themselves, they can write it as "homework" and read it during a therapy session, or they can write letters in groups, read them out loud, discuss their experiences with the activity, and support each other's "self-permission journeys." A participant can also make a voice recording of reading the letter and listen to it, preferable multiple times, to internalize its essence. Participants can also arrange for the letter to be sent to themselves at a later point in time as a reminder and self-permission reinforcer.

### Writing Prompt

From childhood, humans are socialized into seeking permission to do essentially anything. However, as we grow into adults, we become responsible for our own well-being. The person you might need to ask for permission to live a good life, to pursue those things in life you truly cherish, and to take good care of yourself, may actually be... yourself! In this activity, you will write a letter to yourself, granting self-permission to pursue well-being in your life.

First, you are invited to take a few minutes to reflect on what brings *you* well-being and happiness. What makes your life feel fulfilling? You can take notes on a piece of paper as you

contemplate each one of the following questions: Consider what brings you positive emotions, such as joy, contentment, and awe? When do you feel the most relaxed or at ease? What supports your sense of physical well-being? Which activities feel engaging to you, like time stops, so that you are completely immersed in your activities? What are your character strengths and how does it feel when you apply them? Who are some people you truly enjoy spending time with? Which relationships would you like to nurture? What gives you a sense of meaning and/or purpose in life? Which activities feel meaningful to you? Do you belong to groups or communities that you feel are particularly important? What are some goals you have for yourself or aspirations you wish to pursue in your life (short-term or long-term)? What are some things you hope to accomplish? How can you take good care of yourself and your personal health and well-being?

Now, look at your list and consider if there are any of these activities that you don't allow yourself to do as much as you wish to or maybe you feel guilty when you do them—circle or underline these activities. The self-permission letter will be about granting yourself permission to engage with these activities. You will write your letter in 2<sup>nd</sup> person (e.g. write “you have permission to...” instead of “I have permission to...”). You are invited to use language as if you are writing to a good friend. On a new page of paper, begin your letter with the following sentences (and feel free to rephrase the sentences in your own words if that feels better for you): “Dear [your name], You deserve to pursue well-being in your life. You are free to live your life to the fullest. You are entitled to lead a good life. You deserve to flourish.”

Then, list the activities you have identified that can help you live your best life, but that you might not allow yourself to do as much as you wish to. For example, you can begin sentences with “[Your name], you have full permission to...,” “You deserve to...,” or “You are allowed to...” (For example, “you are allowed to attend dance classes, just for the fun of it”).

You can end your letter with these sentences (which you are welcome to re-phrase in your own words): “Dear [your name], please remember that ‘the pursuit of happiness’ is a human right. You, as all humans, are allowed to take good care of yourself; you are allowed to flourish and live your best life. Taking care of personal well-being isn’t selfish; in fact, taking care of yourself allows you to take better care of other people too. You have full permission to pursue well-being in your life. With love, [sign your name].”



## Appendix B

### Proposed Self-Permission Intervention: 15-Minute Self-Permission Mindfulness Meditation and

#### Visualization Script

Please note that the practitioner can adjust the language used in this script to fit the client's specific needs/preferences (e.g. replace words/phrases that do not resonate with the client with words/phrases that feel more supportive for the client). The practitioner can also adjust the length of the meditation as needed.

#### **Suggested Meditation Script**

##### **Introduction, Settling In, Centering, and Breath Work (3-4 min)**

*This guided meditation is a variation of the classic loving-kindness practice tailored specifically towards cultivating self-permission to attend to personal well-being; to allow yourself to take good care of yourself without feeling guilty for doing so, to follow the goals and aspirations you truly value, and to live a good life. The meditation includes awareness of breath and visualizations.*

*First, we will take a few mindful moments to settle in and get centered...*

*I invite you to find a comfortable seat... You might sit in a chair with the feet planted on the ground in front of you, or you're welcome to sit on the floor if this feels supportive.*

*Take a moment to settle in. Hands can rest on the knees or thighs... Maybe you can find a little bit of a lengthening in the spine, sitting upright, and yet relaxed... Take a moment to notice how your body feels in the present moment... Is there any part of your body that you can soften; any spots where you can let go of tension?... Allow your shoulders to relax... Let your jaw and the muscle of your face soften... You can also soften your gaze, finding a soft gaze at the tip of your*

*nose... You're welcome to close your eyes if this feels supportive... Allow yourself to arrive in the present moment...*

*Notice the fact that you are breathing right now... Take a moment to notice where you feel the breath sensations, bringing a gentle curiosity to the quality of each, unique breath... notice the rising sensations of the inhales... and falling sensations of the exhales...*

*I invite you to join me for a few deep breaths, in through the nose, deep inhale, allowing the belly to expand... and breathe out through the mouth...*

*Again, inhale through the nose... and exhale through the mouth...*

*One last time, take a deep inhale... hold it at the top... and let it go...*

*Gently let the breath return to its natural rhythm...*

*Just allow the breath to flow naturally as we move into the visualization...*

### **Self-Permission Meditation/Visualization (8-9 min)**

*I invite you to think of one person who you're close with; a loved one. This can be a person from your past or your present life, a person who you know wishes you well-being and happiness...*

*And when you have a person in mind... envision that this person is standing right in front of you.*

*Think about all the compassion you feel for this person... Notice what it is like to love someone...*

*Just allow these emotions to fill you up. Maybe you visualize these emotions as a warmth, a color, or maybe like sunlight in your heart space, maybe you imagine this fills you up, spreads to the rest of the body, maybe going outside the body, reaching the other person...*

*Now, I invite you to send warm thoughts and wishes to this person. Think about wishing this person well-being and happiness. I invite you to repeat the following phrases in your mind, maybe you can imagine that you are telling these phrases to the person in front of you as I read them, repeating them in your mind.*

*You deserve to be everything that you can possibly be.*

*You have permission to pursue well-being in your life.*

*You are free to live your life to the fullest.*

*You have permission to live up to your full potential.*

*You are allowed to follow your curiosities and your passions.*

*You have permission to pursue a life full of joy and love.*

*You deserve to be happy and healthy, you deserve to live with ease, and you deserve to flourish...*

*The person in front of you responds to the kind thoughts with gratitude. This person feels the same way about you as you feel about them. Now, imagine that this person is sending you the same warm wishes, love and kindness. Allow these emotions to fill you up, maybe by visualizing the love as a warm sensation, a speck of sunlight, or as a color in your chest; your heart space, maybe you picture that this sensation spreads to the rest of the body. Notice what it is like to be loved by someone. Now, imagine that the other person gives you the same permission to be well as you just gave to them. As I read the phrases, you can visualize the other person telling these phrases to you.*

*You deserve to be everything that you can possibly be.*

*You have permission to pursue well-being in your life.*

*You are free to live your life to the fullest.*

*You have permission to live up to your full potential.*

*You are allowed to follow your curiosities and your passions.*

*You have permission to pursue a life full of joy and love.*

*You deserve to be happy and healthy, you deserve to live with ease, and you deserve to flourish...*

*Allow the essence of these phrases to sink in—that the other person has endorsed your permission to live a flourishing life and to take good care of yourself. Just as this person sends you love and kindness and wishes of well-being, you will now offer the same compassion to yourself... You will give yourself permission to attend to your well-being by telling yourself the phrases that I am about to read to you. As I read them, please repeat the phrases in your mind, offering them to yourself.*

*I deserve to be everything that I can possibly be.*

*I give myself permission to pursue well-being in my life.*

*I am free to live my life to the fullest.*

*I allow myself to live up to my full potential.*

*I am free to follow my curiosities and my passions.*

*I give myself permission to pursue a life full of joy and love.*

*I deserve to be happy and healthy... I deserve to live with ease... and I deserve to flourish...*

*Please take a moment to allow the essence of these phrases to sink in. You have given yourself the full permission to take good care of yourself, to follow your aspirations and live a good life.*

### **Closing (1-2 min)**

*I invite you to very gently bring your attention and curiosity back to your breath... Resting your attention to the rising and falling sensation of each breath... In closing, I invite you to join me for one deep belly breath... Inhale through the nose, allowing your belly to expand... and let it go through the mouth...*

*Now gently bring your attention back to your body and notice how you feel in this moment...*

*When you feel ready, you can begin to introduce some gentle movement back into the body, perhaps by wiggling your toes and fingers... And when you're ready, you may gently open your eyes if you kept them closed, coming back into the space.*

## Appendix C

## Proposed Self-Permission Intervention: Sample WOOPS Activity Form

**Activity Instructions:** The form below is a variation of the evidence based WOOP technique (“WOOP My Life,” n.d.). Use the form to “WOOPS” your goals, aspirations, and wishes.

<b>W</b>	<b>WISH:</b> What is the most important wish that you want to accomplish? Your wish should be challenging but feasible.	<b>My wish:</b>
<b>O</b>	<b>OUTCOME:</b> What will be the best possible result from accomplishing your wish? How will you feel?	<b>Best outcome:</b>
<b>O</b>	<b>OBSTACLE:</b> What is the main obstacle inside you that might prevent you from accomplishing your wish? Pause and really imagine the obstacle.	<b>My obstacle:</b>
<b>P</b>	<b>PLAN:</b> What’s an effective and realistic action to tackle the obstacle? Make a when-then plan.	<b>When:</b> (my obstacle)  <b>Then I will:</b> (my action)
<b>S</b>	<b>SELF-PERMISSION:</b> Give yourself the full permission to pursue your wish. Write a few sentences granting self-permission and about why you deserve to have your wish fulfilled.	<b>I give myself permission:</b>

Below you can see an example of what a filled out WOOPS-form might look like.

<b>W</b>	<b>WISH:</b> What is the most important wish that you want to accomplish? Your wish should be challenging but feasible.	<b>My wish:</b>	<i>I wish to establish a daily formal mindfulness meditation practice.</i>
<b>O</b>	<b>OUTCOME:</b> What will be the best possible result from accomplishing your wish? How will you feel?	<b>Best outcome:</b>	<i>I will be less stressed/anxious and more comfortable in social situations. I will become more self-aware. I will have better sleep and higher well-being.</i>
<b>O</b>	<b>OBSTACLE:</b> What is the main obstacle inside you that might prevent you from accomplishing your wish? Pause and really imagine the obstacle.	<b>My obstacle:</b>	<i>I struggle with allowing myself the time to focus on mindfulness meditation. Instead, I get distracted by all the other tasks that need to be completed every day and that feel "more important" or "more urgent."</i>
<b>P</b>	<b>PLAN:</b> What's an effective and realistic action to tackle the obstacle? Make a when-then plan.	<b>When:</b> (my obstacle)  <b>Then I will:</b> (my action)	<i>I wake up in the morning, before I check my email and embark on the day's many responsibilities ...</i>  <i>Meditate for 10-15 minutes using recorded guided meditations.</i>
<b>S</b>	<b>SELF-PERMISSION:</b> Give yourself the full permission to pursue your wish. Write a few sentences granting self-permission and about why you deserve to have your wish fulfilled.	<b>I give myself permission:</b>	<i>I give myself the full permission to meditate every day. I deserve this time for intentional self-care. To give myself this time to meditate isn't selfish; in fact, it will allow me to be a more present and more patient friend/coworkers/family member/partner. I'm allowed to explore mindfulness and to establish a daily practice!</i>

## Appendix D

### Proposed Self-Permission Intervention Reinforcer: Sample Writing Prompt for Self-Permission

#### Nudge

This activity can be used to reinforce the increased level of self-permission that has been cultivated through engaging in one of the other self-permission interventions.

#### **Activity Instructions**

Choose a “self-permission nudge”—a cue that reminds you to allow yourself to attend to your well-being, to follow your aspirations, and to live a good life. Examples of nudges include a quote, a poem, an affirmation, a picture, image, poster, or a symbol, an object such as a bracelet or a figurine, a filled out WOOPS form, or a self-permission letter or note you have written to yourself. You can place your chosen nudge in your environment in a spot that feels most meaningful to you, such as on your wall, above your workspace, on your bathroom mirror or fridge, or as a screensaver on your phone. Use the nudge as a reminder to act and think in alignment with your wish of living a good life. If you experience that you are not acting or thinking as you wish or that you have been neglecting your well-being, you can use the cue as a reminder to gently and non-judgmentally bring yourself back into alignment.