2014

Social Flourishing: Skills for Fostering Positive Social Connections and Relationships

Rebecka Vargas

University of Pennsylvania, hello@rebeckavargas.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/mapp_capstone

Part of the Other Psychology Commons


https://repository.upenn.edu/mapp_capstone/207

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/mapp_capstone/207
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Social Flourishing: Skills for Fostering Positive Social Connections and Relationships

Abstract
The capacity to cultivate flourishing relationships has important implications for health and well-being (Reis & Gable, 2003). There is increasingly a focus in positive psychology, and related fields, on identifying the positive processes and skills that can be employed to foster warm, momentary connections with others, as well as long-lasting, life-enhancing social bonds. At the basis of many of these skills is a requirement to cultivate an interest and concern for others; an orientation towards supporting and promoting other people's well-being. This orientation towards others has the potential to positively impact well-being beyond the participants in the interaction. The benefits of positive social connections have been found to ripple out to other people in the network (Fowler & Christakis, 2009). Therefore the potential positive impacts of developing and cultivating positive relationships are substantial and wide-reaching.

Keywords
positive psychology, well-being, relationships

Disciplines
Other Psychology
Social Flourishing: Skills for Fostering Positive Social Connections and Relationships

Rebecka Vargas
University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Amy Walker Rebele
August 1, 2014

Author Note

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to Amy Walker Rebele for all her wonderful support, wisdom and guidance in advising this capstone. Also to her lab group, Natalya Pestalozzi, Abby Mengers, Michelle Reitzner and Travis Millman, for hours of support, suggestions and fun. I’m also so grateful to my boyfriend, Rodrigo for supporting me while I was writing this paper. Also to my lovely mum, for reading through the final version and giving her feedback.
Abstract

The capacity to cultivate flourishing relationships has important implications for health and well-being (Reis & Gable, 2003). There is increasingly a focus in positive psychology, and related fields, on identifying the positive processes and skills that can be employed to foster warm, momentary connections with others, as well as long-lasting, life-enhancing social bonds. At the basis of many of these skills is a requirement to cultivate an interest and concern for others; an orientation towards supporting and promoting other people’s well-being. This orientation towards others has the potential to positively impact well-being beyond the participants in the interaction. The benefits of positive social connections have been found to ripple out to other people in the network (Fowler & Christakis, 2009). Therefore the potential positive impacts of developing and cultivating positive relationships are substantial and wide-reaching.
Table of Contents

Social Flourishing: Skills for Fostering Positive Social Connections and Relationships ....................... 4

*Introduction to Positive Psychology* ........................................................................................................ 5

*Positive Relationships and Well-being* ................................................................................................... 9

*Models of Well-being* .............................................................................................................................. 14

*Traditional Relationship Research* ........................................................................................................ 17

*Positive Relationship Research* .............................................................................................................. 18

Positive Relationship Skills ....................................................................................................................... 22

  - Shared activities ..................................................................................................................................... 22
  - Active constructive responding .............................................................................................................. 26
  - High-quality connections ....................................................................................................................... 28

Character Strengths ...................................................................................................................................... 33

  - Gratitude .............................................................................................................................................. 34
  - Humility .............................................................................................................................................. 37
  - Forgiveness ......................................................................................................................................... 39

Touch ....................................................................................................................................................... 41

Positivity Resonance ................................................................................................................................. 43

The Michelangelo Phenomenon .................................................................................................................. 46

Giving ....................................................................................................................................................... 49

Social Support ........................................................................................................................................... 54

*The Hive Hypothesis* ................................................................................................................................. 57

When Positive Relationship Behaviors Might not be Positive .................................................................. 60

Implications ................................................................................................................................................ 61

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................... 64

References .................................................................................................................................................... 66
Social Flourishing: Skills for Fostering Positive Social Connections and Relationships

The field of positive psychology seeks to identify, understand and promote factors, processes and conditions that foster well-being (Peterson, 2006). One of the most robust findings in the field is the significant contribution that positive social relationships can make to well-being (Reis & Gable, 2003). Positive social relationships have been linked with positive health outcomes such as fewer colds, lowered rates of heart disease, diabetes and Alzheimer’s disease, increased longevity, improved professional success and higher well-being (Fredrickson, 2013; Reis & Gable, 2003). Social networks and connections have the capacity to affect people in significant and lasting ways. For example, Fowler and Christakis (2009) demonstrated that happiness spreads within a network, up to three degrees of separation (one’s friend’s friend’s friend). The investment that people make in social relationships, whether at home, with friends, at work or in communities has the capacity to ripple out to others that they might not even know. When people foster positive momentary connections with others or form and develop lasting social bonds they are also building other people’s social resources, experiences of love and trust, and ultimately contributing to their well-being (Fredrickson, 2013). Each person has the capacity to make others happier, more resilient and more pro-social, and network studies demonstrate that this is contagious (Fowler & Christakis, 2009). The capacity for positive influence extends past direct social networks. Recognizing and leveraging this has exciting implications for families, communities and even nations.

The research findings from the field of positive psychology, as well as a broader consideration of other disciplines, can help to develop skills and behaviors that foster strong, positive and flourishing relationships. A flourishing relationship is one characterized by growth, energy and resilience, and which allows a healthy balance with other relationships in the
person’s life (Fincham & Beach, 2010). In this paper, happiness is defined as a fleeting, momentary assessment of positive emotion and satisfaction with life (Jayawickreme, Forgeard, & Seligman, 2012). Well-being comprises both eudaimonic and hedonic components to mean the extent to which a person is feeling and doing well across time (Jayawickreme et al., 2012). Flourishing is a characterization of having high well-being and can be used to describe one’s life in general or as is the case in this paper, one’s relationships (Jayawickreme et al., 2012). This paper will provide a brief introduction to the field of positive psychology, followed by an introduction to the research linking social capital and well-being, and a discussion of some of the prominent well-being models. Additionally, the prevailing focus of the research on negative factors in relationships and why a science of positive relationships is necessary, will be discussed. The remainder of the paper will involve an introduction to the literature on positive relationship behaviors that have been shown to contribute to relationship flourishing. It is via these skills, processes and conscious behaviors that people can build their social networks and ideally positively impact the lives of others. Rather than leaving this to chance, fostering a focus on these skills helps people to be conscious of their interactions with others to promote positive connections. Common to all these skills is a capacity to look beyond personal self-interest, and a bias toward considering and supporting the well-being of other people. (Fredrickson, 2013).

Introduction to Positive Psychology

In 1998, in his opening presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Professor Martin Seligman called for a new field in psychology, that of positive psychology (Seligman, 1999). This field was formed to complement and extend the research of other psychological fields by including a science of positive experiences, traits and institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Since this time, there has been a burgeoning of research
to understand the contexts and activities that contribute to the optimal functioning of people, groups and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Rusk & Waters, 2013). Positive psychology offers an understanding of the good life, underpinned by strong, empirical and theoretically sound foundations (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

When the field of psychology more broadly was founded, the three missions were to 1) research how to relieve mental illness, 2) increase productivity and well-being, and 3) recognize and cultivate high talent (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As Seligman (1999) noted in his address, he thought that psychology had moved too far away from it’s original objectives. Rather than focusing on how to foster flourishing, talent and productivity in all people, psychology had become focused predominately on curing mental illness. Undoubtedly, an emphasis on mental illness has been essential and has lead to significant breakthroughs. Notably, 14 of the mental health disorders (which were previously incurable) can now be sufficiently treated (Seligman, 1999). This focus on distress and impairment has also been seen in other domains of psychology. Within the context of relationship science, psychological studies have illuminated how couples respond to negative relationship behavior (e.g. criticism, jealousy, infidelities), and on how and why relationships dissolve (Reis & Gable, 2003). Much of this research has been based on the assumption that by removing the bad we are fostering the good. Positive psychology advances the notion that human experience is more than avoiding or fixing the problems, concerns and difficulties that are encountered (Peterson, 2006). The aim of positive psychology is to redress this imbalance by not only focusing on repair and remedy of the negative elements but by also building the positive qualities in life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This movement is also being increasingly reflected within relationship science as researchers are turning their attention to positive elements, including how couples
respond to each other’s victories (Gable & Gonzaga, 2006) or the consequences of positive relationship behaviors (e.g. gratitude, social support) (Gable & Haidt, 2005).

The founders of positive psychology make no claim to originality, noting that there is a long-history of philosophical foundations and psychological theories that underpin the field (Peterson, 2006). Since ancient times, philosophers have been asking similar questions to positive psychology researchers, including wondering, what constitutes a happy life and what contributes to our sense of meaning (Peterson, 2006). Positive psychology is building and extending on the interesting and relevant insights made over the past century by psychologists including William James (1985) (healthy-mindedness), Gordon Allport (1958) (positive human characteristics) and Abraham Maslow (1968) (self-actualization). Indeed Maslow (1954) anticipated this field, noting:

The science of psychology has been far more successful on the negative than on the positive side. It has revealed to us much about man’s shortcomings, his illnesses, his sins, but little about his potentialities, his virtues, his achievable aspirations, or his full psychological height. It is as if psychology had voluntarily restricted itself to only half its rightful jurisdiction, and that, the darker, meaner half. (p. 354).

Many of these founders also recognized that social connections are core in leading a flourishing life (Ryff & Singer, 2000). Maslow (1968) submitted that people who are self-actualized are more able to give love, they enjoy social connections to a greater extent, and they act in more altruistic and generous ways. Furthermore, Maslow (1968) argued that the full development of a person isn’t possible without experiencing a kind of other-oriented, unselfish love for another person and loving them for who they are. Erikson (1959) suggested that the tasks of adult development are largely social, including the capacity to establish close bonds with others.
(intimacy) and the ability to guide and support others (generativity). Furthermore, Baumeister and Leary (1995) highlighted the need to belong as a basic human motive.

The field of positive psychology has sought to encourage a holistic and cohesive body of research, where what is known about human flourishing can be consolidated, disseminated and celebrated. Researchers and practitioners in the field aim to identify gaps and possibilities in both the literature and application (Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006). What distinguishes positive psychology from most of its more philosophical predecessors, is its scientific grounding. Positive psychology seeks to not only theorize about questions about the good life, but to measure and test them. The number of articles published after the establishment of the field legitimizes the efforts of the founders to advance research into human flourishing (86% of all positive psychology related publications were published after 1998) (Rusk & Waters, 2013). The field also seeks to provide a common structure and nomenclature that permits cross-collaboration between a range of psychological, and even broader fields, that was not possible before (Linley et al., 2006). Indeed between 1991 and 2011, 49% of the articles published relating to positive psychology came from outside the field of psychology (e.g. public health, management, neuroscience) (Rusk & Waters, 2013).

Positive psychology has become an umbrella term for a range of topics that relate to human flourishing (as illustrated in Figure 1) (Rusk & Waters, 2013). The field seeks to bring together what have been isolated threads of theory and research to elucidate a consolidated conception of what leads to human flourishing (Peterson, 2006). Since the founding of the field, research is ever expanding; the number of positive psychology cite-able journal articles rose from 216 in 1992 (.94% of the data set of journal articles) to 2300 in 2011 (4.4% of the data set that year) (Rusk & Waters, 2013).
Positive psychology is continuing to develop understandings of life experiences, such as positive emotions, social relationships and achievement, as well as to identify and validate activities that improve well-being e.g. loving-kindness meditation (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008), savoring (Bryant, Ericksen, & DeHoek, 2011) and journal writing (Pennebaker, 1997).

As mentioned, a significant focus within positive psychology has been on social relationships.

**Positive Relationships and Well-being**

A robust and replicated finding in positive psychology is that the capacity to love and be loved is a central human tendency and that positive, healthy social relationships are highly predictive of well-being (Gable & Gosnell, 2011; Peterson, 2006). While it’s possible for individuals to influence and increase their well-being without interacting with others, in order to function adaptively people cannot solely have regard for themselves (Haidt, 2006). As will be discussed in this section, various social relationships throughout life have the potential to foster...
well-being, either directly or indirectly, between parents and children, spouses, friends or larger groups.

To some extent the need for relationships is a result of evolution and biology. Humans evolved from an environment where social relationships were absolutely vital to survival. Our ancestors cultivated social relationships to support child-rearing, safety and hunting (Jaremka, Gabriel, & Carvallo, 2011). The evolutionary impact of this is evidenced by the fact that the need to create and maintain social bonds transcends culture; in every society on the planet people form groups and bonds to contribute to positive life outcomes (Jaremka et al., 2011). Furthermore, human biology is designed to draw people to others, and to form, maintain and develop relationships. For example, release of the hormone oxytocin promotes the formation and maintenance of warm, social bonds (Peterson, 2006). Moreover, researchers have suggested that the reason humans have developed a large pre-frontal cortex is to process the intricacies and complexities of social interactions. This is supported by the correlation between primate species’ prefrontal cortex size and the formation, extent and intensity of social groups (Shultz & Dunbar, 2007).

Relationships with others matter in terms of promoting daily happiness, long-term well-being and survival. Jaremka and colleagues (2011) asked participants to write about their most emotionally-intense life events (whether positive or negative) and found that people were more likely to write about events involving social interactions than solitary events. The inherent ‘need to belong’ was named by Baumeister and Leary (1995) as a basic human tendency, and Ryan and Deci (2000) cite ‘relatedness’ (along with competence and autonomy) as one of three basic psychological requirements. Social bonds are also associated with physical health in important ways; people who are able to form and develop strong social bonds are more likely to be
healthier and live longer than those who do not (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). As Fredrickson’s (2013) research demonstrates, when people experience strong, healthy, flourishing social bonds with others, they grow and develop, their resilience and effectiveness increases and they become healthier and happier (Fredrickson, 2013).

The relationship between parents and children is instrumental in setting the foundations for well-being and future social bonds. In particular, research on attachment highlights these foundations for developmental processes and functions, such as social relatedness and emotion regulation later in life (Sroufe, 2005). Secure attachment ensures that children feel safe enough to explore their surroundings, thereby developing skills and knowledge necessary for success in life (Haidt, 2006). Secure attachment also increases children’s capacity to develop and sustain improved relationships as they get older, which is associated with increased well-being (Peterson, 2006). This is further discussed below. Not only is psychological and emotional support essential to well-being in childhood, but physical support, as evidenced by the research on touch has also been found to play a role. Touch increases levels of oxytocin and this neurotransmitter boosts both mood and health, ultimately fosters well-being (Fredrickson, 2009).

Romantic love (marriage, stable pair-bonding) has also been found to be predictive of well-being and happiness and decreased levels of depression (Seligman, 2002). A recent meta-analysis of 93 studies showed that marital quality is a significant predictor of personal well-being, both at the point of measurement and across time (Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007). Furthermore, being emotionally supported by a romantic partner has been associated with a decreased risk of morbidity and increased longevity (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Through romantic love, people receive security, support and acceptance; they idealize each other’s
strengths and discount each other’s flaws (Seligman, 2002).

As discussed, human evolution favored the formation of groups; therefore, people are hardwired to be social. Humans instinctively seek out and derive well-being from groups, such as friendship groups, religious groups or communities more broadly. In evolution theory, group selection suggests that the groups that ultimately succeed are those composed of individuals that act in the best interests of the group, whether this is personally advantageous or not (Wilson & Wilson, 2007). Humans have therefore evolved to rely on others and also to value and foster their ability to cooperate and coordinate efforts, which increases both individual and group success (Maddux, 2009). The moral community hypothesis suggests that people desire to be part of groups with which they share principles and values, and that this helps members to flourish (Haidt, Seder, & Kesebir, 2008). This hypothesis helps explain why belonging to a religious community is a strong predictor of both well-being and charitable giving (Myers, 2000). As mentioned, networks and communities are important because, as Fowler and Christakis (2009) demonstrated, happiness (and to a lesser extent unhappiness) spreads within a network. It appears that personal happiness depends on the happiness of the network a person is connected to; the happier their network, the happier they are.

Not only do people derive positive benefits from groups in their personal lives but also in their professional ones as well. In workplaces, creating positive social connections and relationships helps to produce organizational assets such as trust, energy, joy and respect (W. Baker & Dutton, 2007). Organizational cultures based on warmth, affection and care for colleagues have been linked with increased job satisfaction and engagement, improved teamwork and decreased absenteeism and burnout (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014). When an organizational culture is cultivated to be ‘other-focused’, employees feel included, part of the family and
interconnected (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014). This leads to increased collaboration, cooperation and teamwork (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014). Research is also demonstrating that the merits of an organizational culture based on positive social relationships also ripple out to benefit clients and customers (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014). These cultures promote increased social capital, which fosters the generative capacity of people and groups (W. Baker & Dutton, 2007). Social capital refers to resources that travel through social networks. These may include elements such as help, contacts, services, emotional support and knowledge (W. Baker & Dutton, 2007). Social capital in an organization supports employees’ ability to reach their personal and professional goals (W. Baker & Dutton, 2007). Positive social capital helps employees to develop, thrive and flourish in organizations (W. Baker & Dutton, 2007).

It is important to recognize that not all relationships predict increased well-being; the quality of social relationships is key (Peterson, 2006). In the family context, children without an emotional attachment or with avoidant or ambivalent attachment patterns display decreased wellbeing (Peterson, 2006). Problematic romantic relationships are negatively related to well-being and this negative impact increases with the frequency of interaction between the couple (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). One could hypothesize that this finding holds true for other relationship types as well. Negative emotions in the context of social relationships, (e.g. anger) if extreme or unmanaged, can reduce a person’s quality of life (Buss, 2000). In addition, groups that are too oppressive or rigid, have been associated with increased suicide rates (Haidt et al., 2008).

Furthermore, the dissolution or absence of relationships can be a significant contributor to isolation, depression and detrimental behavior at all life stages (Reis & Gable, 2003). A meta-analysis of 148 studies determined that the impact of social isolation on health was comparable
to the negative health effects of smoking 15 cigarettes per day (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Encouragingly, cultivating positive relationships with others can buffer against environmental factors that may have negative health impacts. For example, there is a demonstrated link between socio-economic status and health such that the lower one’s position on the socio-economic hierarchy, the higher the risks to health and life (Singer & Ryff, 1999). Singer and Ryff (1999) found that positive social relationships (both with parents and with a spouse) are protective against the negative impact of lower socio-economic status. Strong and supportive social relationships and a wide social network appear to reduce stress, promote health and enhance psychological functioning (Taylor, Repetti, & Seeman, 1997)

Studies are accumulating to continue illustrating that at every life stage, the quality of social interactions and relationships has significant impacts on psychological, behavioral and physiological functioning and therefore on health and well-being (Taylor et al., 1997). The research suggests that in order to foster well-being people should cultivate strong connections with their children, establish and maintain positive romantic relationships, make genuine friendships, surround themselves with happy people, join groups that align with their values and foster positive social capital in organizations. Rather than assuming that people need not work at their relationships, this research suggests that significant returns to well-being are gained by consciously and consistently investing in others. Further research is needed to determine how best to develop social capital at home, at work and in communities to increase well-being and promote health (Taylor et al., 1997).

**Models of Well-being**

It is clear that strong, positive social relationships have important positive effects on well-being. But how do we define well-being? Within positive psychology there are multiple views
of what constitutes flourishing and well-being (Ryff & Singer, 2000). However, within this
variety are points of similarity that represent useful starting points for conceptualizing
flourishing (Ryff & Singer, 2000). For example, it’s agreed that well-being is a multi-
dimensional concept that includes elements of both hedonia and eudaimonia (Lent, 2004).
Hedonic well-being is captured by ‘feeling good’ (e.g. pleasure, high positive affect, low
negative affect), whereas eudaimonic well-being is aligned with ‘doing well’ (e.g. meaning,
engagement, purpose, achievement) (Jayawickreme et al., 2012). Another important point of
convergence is that almost all well-being models include positive relationships as one of their
key elements (Reis & Gable, 2003). This is illustrated in Table 1, which compares the elements
of four of the most well-cited, multidimensional well-being models.

Further research is needed to consolidate these theories of well-being as outlined in Table
1; while some elements are common there is also many elements that are unique. The research is
also not clear on whether the above elements contribute to well-being or whether they are an
outcome of well-being. It is likely that some components, including positive relationships, are
both a defining feature of well-being, as well as a pathway towards flourishing. As a pathway
and outcome variable, positive relationships could form a virtuous cycle, mutually benefitting
each other (Reis & Gable, 2003). In a review of the positive psychology literature Rusk and
Waters (2014) found five domains of psychosocial functioning that contribute to well-being.
Virtues and relationships were one of these five domains. This domain included enduring
relationships and brief interactions across contexts (e.g. romantic, friend, family, colleague,
community) as well as the virtues and actions that underpin their success (or not) (Rusk &
Waters, 2014). Rusk and Waters (2014) note that the domain of virtues and relationships is
perhaps the most complex because it influences and relies on inputs from the other four domains
(outlined in Figure 2).

Table 1

Outline of four well-being models (Hone, Jarden, Schofield, & Duncan, 2014, p. 65)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive relationships</td>
<td>Positive relationships</td>
<td>Positive relationships</td>
<td>Positive relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive affect (interested)</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose in life</td>
<td>Meaning and purpose</td>
<td>Meaning and purpose</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal growth</td>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>Competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-acceptance</td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-acceptance and self-esteem</td>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive affect (happy)</td>
<td>Positive emotion</td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive emotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental mastery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social contribution</td>
<td></td>
<td>Social contribution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social integration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social growth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social acceptance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social coherence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional stability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vitality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Resilience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2. Outline of the five domains of psychosocial functioning that contribute to well-being.

This figure represents an abstract map of the 3466 found terms that were identified in the positive psychology literature (Rusk & Waters, 2014, p. 5)

What this study indicates is that positive social relationships are a pervasive component, both in terms of people’s striving for a flourishing life and as an outcome of high well-being (Rusk & Waters, 2014). Relationships impact multiple components life and it is therefore vital to consider how to can best cultivate social connections.

**Traditional Relationship Research**

In much the same way that traditional psychology had predominately focused on impairment and distress, relationship science has tended to focus on why relationships fail, when relationships are harmful, and the negative implications of unsuccessfully forming healthy social bonds (Ryff & Singer, 2000). There are a number of justifiable reasons why researchers have focused on issues of distress and impairment in relationships. First, as discussed, negative interactions in relationships can have immediate and sometimes irreparable consequences (Reis & Gable, 2003). There is undoubtedly a need to recognize and respond to negative events to
avoid the potentially damaging impact to well being. Second, there is a natural tendency to want to help those who are in pain or suffering before helping those who seem to be managing relatively well (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Furthermore, it is thought that research on the negative is often more productive and helpful (Fincham & Beach, 2010) because thoughts, feelings and actions are often more strongly influenced by negative as opposed to positive events (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). However, what this research may fail to consider is that a particular power of positive events lies in their cumulative effect over time (rather than their intensity) (Fincham & Beach, 2010).

While the negative aspects of relationships are undoubtedly important, they certainly do not represent the entire spectrum of social experience. People do not seek out relationships simply to avoid negative outcomes (Reis & Gable, 2003). Instead, people seek out relationships to feel connection and to experience growth, joy and fulfillment (Reis & Gable, 2003). The absence of conflict and contempt in relationships by no means implies that a relationship is flourishing (Fincham & Beach, 2010). It may be free from pain but unless there are positive benefits the relationships is likely to be languishing (Fincham & Beach, 2010). It is therefore key that the science on why relationships fail or are detrimental is complemented by a thorough understanding of the circumstances under which relationships succeed and flourish (Reis & Gable, 2003).

**Positive Relationship Research**

If a primary goal is positive, sustainable and energizing relationships an understanding of how to bring these about is needed (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Researchers must consider the factors and mechanisms that are associated with positive relationships and determine whether these are replicable. Research focusing solely on dysfunction or distress is insufficient to reach this level
of understanding. A continued push for more balance in the literature is required since initial studies highlight a range of powerful and positive implications. For example, studies demonstrate that positive relationships create upward cycles of flourishing (Fredrickson, 2013). When people feel secure, appreciated and confident in their relationships they also behave in pro-social, relationship-promoting ways (Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2012). This means that small changes in how people interact with others could have much bigger outcomes in their own lives and in the lives of others.

Assuming that the absence of negative relationship events is the same as a flourishing relationship has been likened to assuming the absence of illness is the same as good health (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Indeed, research is indicating that positive and negative thoughts, emotions and behaviors in relationships are independently functional of each other; they are on different spectrums rather than at opposite ends of the same spectrum (Reis & Gable, 2003). Therefore, research is also needed on the positive elements, processes and mechanisms within relationships. This distinction between the two spectrums is sometimes captured by the contrast between approach and avoidance goals. Approach goals involve motives to support a positive outcome (e.g. to be fit and healthy) (Lyubomirsky, 2008). On the other hand, avoidance goals are characterized by the desire to evade something negative (e.g. not to be overweight) (Lyubomirsky, 2008). These two outcomes are related but qualitatively very different. In general, studies indicate that people who work towards approach goals are generally happier, and are less anxious, distressed and unhealthy than people who usually pursue avoidance goals (Lyubomirsky, 2008). It is thought that approach motives may encourage attention to positive cues (e.g. smiles, touch, thank yous). Conversely, avoidance goals may promote sensitivity to negative cues in searching for threats or failures, and in turn, these can become self-fulfilling
In the context of close relationships, evidence is continuing to accumulate supporting the importance of approach goals (e.g. to make my partner happy, for the success of our work team, to strengthen our friendship). Impett and colleagues (2005) found that approach goals in romantic relationships predicted relationship quality outcomes (satisfaction, closeness and fun), decreased conflict, increased satisfaction with life and elevated positive affect. Avoidance goals were negatively correlated with relationship quality and satisfaction with life and positively associated with negative affect and increased conflict (Impett et al., 2005). This research suggests that behaving in ways that promote harmony and connection in relationships achieves greater outcomes than behaviors designed to avoid conflict or discord. This further highlights why research on the desirable positive elements is necessary and useful.

Given the essential nature of positive relationships to well-being, the remainder of this paper unpacks some of these positive behaviors, processes and elements that contribute to flourishing relationships. Although the entirety of what is currently known about positive relationship skills will not be covered, a good sample of representative findings is included. The subset of topics below was chosen because they are all readily applicable in daily interactions and, to a large extent, are not influenced by a person’s history of social connection and support (e.g. the impact of attachment style on future relationships). Furthermore, these skills are all fairly simple techniques that have been shown to have immediate, as well as, lasting impacts. Fortunately, they are also largely trainable. Throughout this section short stories are included to illustrate each relationship skill. The stories follow one character through her day, highlighting the opportunities she takes for social connection, as well as, moments where others invest in her. While these examples are simplified, they will help to illustrate the positive impact that these
behaviors can have in increasing our own and other’s wellbeing.

The majority of research in this sphere is related to romantic or married couples (Reis, 2007). However, as mentioned, well-being is also positively influenced by relationships with friends, family, colleagues and connections to the wider community. These various types of relationships serve different purposes and fulfill different functions, yet research shows that all these connections have the capacity to contribute to well-being. For example, Sandstrom and Dunn (2014) found that both strong and weak ties make important contributions to a person’s sense of belonging and well-being. Strong ties involve those with whom people have frequent contact, high emotional intensity and increased intimacy (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). These might include a spouse, best friend or close colleague. Weak ties are characterized by infrequent contact, low emotional intensity and low attachment (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). Examples of weak ties might include the local barista, a person seen regularly while collecting kids from school, or a neighbor that always smiles and says hello while walking his dog. Furthermore, the number of roles a person occupies (e.g. friend, colleague, spouse) the more their well-being and resistance to infection is promoted (Cohen, Brissette, Skoner, & Doyle, 2000). It seems that by fostering a broad range of relationships and connections across a person’s community can positively influence both well-being and health outcomes. Unfortunately most of the research to date has limited their studies to one relationship type. This paper attempts to take a broader viewpoint by exploring a variety of relational contexts (spouse, friends and colleagues). Throughout the paper opportunities to transfer research findings from one context to another will be highlighted.
Positive Relationship Skills

Shared activities.

_The instructor tightens your harness and you smile nervously at your partner._

_‘This is going to be great,’ he says, reaching over to squeeze your hand._

_‘Just make sure not to drop me’ you laugh._

_‘Alright, you’re ready to go,’ says the instructor, ‘Take your time, we’ll be here if you need help making it up the wall.’_

_Your partner smiles to reassure you as you put your hand on the first hold. Tentatively you scale the initial few feet. You look down, your heart racing._

_‘Keep going, you can do it,’ your partner encourages you._

_You gain some confidence and turn back to continue ascending._

_You stretch out and touch the top. Thrilled you smile down at your partner and you carefully make your way back down. As your feet touch the ground, your partner gathers you up in a big hug, saying ‘great job!’_

_You grin at him, excited to have conquered your fears, ‘Thanks, that felt great! Your turn!’_

_Driving home that night you both excitedly relive the evening together. ‘That was so much fun, I’m so glad we did it!’_

_Reis and colleagues (2000) found that engaging in social activities is related to increased daily wellbeing. In general, sharing experiences with others is beneficial to both relationships and well-being. Research is continuing to identify the activities that are particularly beneficial for forming and developing relationships. What does the research suggest are the best types of dates, activities with friends and social activities to engage in with colleagues? Studies suggest_
that variety, novelty, fun and excitement are important considerations, as are activities that foster
genuine engagement, both in the activity and with each other.

One of the frequently reported findings in positive psychology is that engaging in experiences is linked with more happiness than buying material possessions (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). It is therefore often recommended that people should consider spending disposable income on experiences rather than material belongings, in order to promote happiness. Further research indicates that this may not be the complete picture and that the social component of both experiences and material possessions must be considered. As Caprariello and Reis (2013) discovered, material items are linked with well-being to the extent that they facilitate a social element. Their study found that social material goods (e.g. board games, sports equipment) produced the same positive impact on well-being as social experiences. Material goods or solitary experiences did not produce the same boost in happiness (Caprariello & Reis, 2013). This may be because spending that includes a social component may signal an investment in relationships (Caprariello & Reis, 2013). This investment in others may then increase perceived levels of commitment to the relationship (Caprariello & Reis, 2013). Furthermore, social activities or social material possessions help to create narratives of experience that people enjoy talking about into the future, as highlighted in the example above (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Caprariello and Reis (2013) note that further research is needed to determine how particular relationships may alter the perceived value of social material possessions and experiences. For example, to foster well-being, would it be better to spend a weekend away with a romantic partner, an old friend or at a work retreat? Whatever the result, research indicates that increases to happiness come less from the activity or material item than the component of sharing these things with others (Caprariello & Reis, 2013).
The above research demonstrates that bringing people together to engage in an activity is a potential pathway to increased well-being. To explain this finding Jacobs Bao and Lyubomirsky (2013) have proposed the hedonic adaptation prevention model. They note that over time, people may tend to adapt to their relationships, which increases their experience of boredom. This is particularly true in romantic relationships. At the beginning of a new relationship, people usually engage in lots of novel activities, they’re learning new things about each other and sharing information about themselves. As time progresses, this excitement can wane as the events become expected and/or predictable. In positive psychology more generally, this notion is known as the ‘hedonic treadmill’. Research suggests that people in general tend to adapt or habituate to a change in circumstances (either positive or negative) so that after a period of time it no longer produces the same effect on well-being (Diener, Eunkook, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Jacobs Bao and Lyubomirksy (2013) suggest that the tendency to adapt to romantic relationships may be moderated by two variables; variety and appreciation. Aron, Aron, Norman and McKenna (2000) indeed found that couples who engaged in shared exciting or novel activities experienced increased relationship satisfaction due to decreased relationship boredom. As illustrated in the example at the beginning of this section, engaging in exciting or novel experiences may generate shared positive emotions (Aron et al., 2000). Such experiences can encourage cooperation, thereby cultivating a feeling of interdependence and intimacy (Aron et al., 2000). This can cause a spillover effect whereby the positive assessment of the activity creates a positive view of the relationship overall (Aron et al., 2000). The role of appreciation or gratitude will be discussed further in the context of character strengths below, noting that gratefulness can positively impact relationship commitment and satisfaction. Therefore, couples may be able to foster increased well-being and relationship commitment, but slowed adaptation,
by engaging in a variety of new or exciting activities and, in turn, appreciating these events and their partner (Jacobs Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2013).

Another consideration for shared activities is genuine interest. Girme, Overall and Faingataa (2014) discovered that positive activities and relationship outcomes were dependent on the extent to which partners were invested in the activity. Only when partners were responsive and genuinely interested in sharing in the activity was improved relationship quality observed. Girme and colleagues (2014) found that feelings of closeness and relationship quality increased when partners indicated that their motivation to engage in shared activities was for relationship or partner-related reasons (approach reasons). Those with pro-social motivations for engaging in shared activities reported less stress, increased satisfaction and increased closeness (Girme et al., 2014). On the other hand, Girme and colleagues (2014) found that lower motivation and commitment to participate in shared activities was associated with relationship dissolution.

In an organizational context, creating spaces and environments that foster fun, exciting activities may contribute to social connections, and therefore to well-being. It appears there is great potential to grow in this regard as researchers have identified that mood is often best on Fridays and Saturdays and lowest on Mondays (Reis et al., 2000). This may be because of weekly fluctuations in feelings of autonomy and relatedness (Reis et al., 2000). Weekends usually allow for chances to connect with family and friends (relatedness) and opportunities to engage in activities of a person’s choosing (autonomy). Organizations may therefore want to consider incorporating activities and more social time, ideally to improve mood, autonomy and relatedness. In general, work activities that involve social interaction seem to positively impact well-being and to decrease feelings of stress and worry (Rath & Harter, 2010). Rath and Harter (2010) note that every hour of social time (whether via email, on the phone, in meetings, at work
or at home) increases a person’s chance of having a good day. It appears that six hours of social time is ideal but that even three hours of social time decreases the chance of having a bad day to just 10% (Rath & Harter, 2010). Workplaces may therefore consider scheduling time, for shared activities (e.g. team lunches, morning teas, walking meetings) and to foster opportunities for people to connect, in order to boost well-being, autonomy and relatedness during the working week.

It’s clear that spending time with others generally fosters well-being. By increasing the amount of time people spend with others they’re meeting their basic needs for relatedness. Being conscious of how this time is spent can create even higher gains. Research shows that participating in new and interesting activities, engaging in activities for the investment in others and the relationship, as well as taking time to appreciate these events, may have the largest impact on well-being and relationship flourishing.

**Active constructive responding**

_The next morning you sit down at your desk as your colleague says good morning. She asks how your evening was. You tell her about the rock climbing date._

‘Wow, that sounds amazing! What was it like?’

‘It was scary but fun. It was a great opportunity to try something new and it felt great to connect with Mike.’

‘What did Mike think?’

‘He loved it, couldn’t get enough. It’s been something he’s wanted to try for a while. I think we’ll definitely have to go again.’

‘It sounds like you will. What a great date!’

‘It was awesome. How about you, how was your night?’
This example highlights a skill known as Active Constructive Responding (ACR). ACR is a response style whereby a listener responds to good news from another in an enthusiastic and supportive manner (Gable & Gonzaga, 2006). ACR is distinct from three other response styles; active-destructive, passive-destructive and passive-constructive (Figure 3) (Gable & Gonzaga, 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructive</th>
<th>Passive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>constructive responding (e.g. enthusiastic support)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>constructive responding (e.g. demeaning the event)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3. Four response styles to good news from the Active-Constructive Responding model* (Gable & Gonzaga, 2006)

ACR has been found to increase commitment, satisfaction and love in romantic relationships (Gable & Gonzaga, 2006). Conversely, if a partner regularly responds in a passive-constructive, active-destructive, or passive-destructive manner, there is a negative correlation with relationship satisfaction, trust and togetherness (Gable, Impett, Reis, & Asher, 2004). Research has demonstrated that ACR increases the ability of the sharer to ‘capitalize’ on their good news and, in this way, positive affect and well-being is increased (Gable & Gonzaga, 2006). ACR conveys to the sharer that the listener has understood them and that they validate and care for them (Gable & Gonzaga, 2006). It highlights and recognizes the other person’s strengths and, importantly, also reinforces that the listener values the relationship (Gable & Gonzaga, 2006).

In the example above, ACR encouraged the sharer to reciprocate and show interest in the listener.

Research has demonstrated that people are likely to experience increased intimacy and trust with someone who responds actively and constructively to their good news whether big or
small (Gable & Gonzaga, 2006). These relational benefits are in addition to the positive effects of social support that are gained when people share bad news or seek help. This means that social support is just as important when it comes to positive events as it is to negative events (Gable et al., 2004). ACR has been found to reduce the likelihood of daily conflicts while increasing the likelihood of engaging in fun and/or relaxing activities (Gable & Gonzaga, 2006). Furthermore, Lambert and colleagues (2012) found that positive affect, happiness and life satisfaction are increased in the sharer when the listener responds in an active-constructive manner. These positive effects went above and beyond those found when someone recalled an experience of being in a warm interaction with someone; it was the recall of positive experiences that showed the greatest benefits.

Why might this be the case? Lambert and colleagues (2012) suggest that by discussing good news with others, people are creating additional memory traces of the event. The original memory may now be accompanied by memories of the person’s positive reaction to the event. Sharers may also experience increased positive mood because they feel that they have improved the mood of the listener. It is also possible that creating positive mood in others creates the perception that the listener is pleased with you and this may lead to an increase in self-esteem. Although continued research is needed, existing research is clear that responding in an active and constructive way to people’s good news is a great way to develop the bond and increase the mood and well-being of both sharer and responder.

**High-quality connections.**

*A client walks into your office looking worried.*

‘Chris, hi, how are you?’ you say.

*He asks if you’re free. He has a problem that he needs your help with.*
'Of course, let’s go into the meeting room where it’s a bit quieter’ you say.

Chris takes a seat and you sit facing him. As he speaks you listen carefully, nodding and prompting as he explains the problem. Once Chris has told you about the issue, you summarize this to make sure you’ve understood. You reassure Chris that the problem is manageable and explain how you will assist him to resolve it. By the end of the meeting Chris is relieved and grateful to have the opportunity to talk it through with you. He feels comfortable with the way forward and leaves feeling energized to tackle the problem.

This example illustrates a high-quality connection (HQC). HQCs are those interactions that are subjectively felt to create positive energy and vitality, a sense of positive regard and a heightening of felt mutuality (Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2012). HQCs involve strong, meaningful and positive interactions between people, in which both participants are fully participating and engaging in the connection (Dutton, 2003; Stephens et al., 2012). The experience of HQCs creates interpersonal assets such as confidence, trust, reassurance and joy in both parties (W. Baker & Dutton, 2007). Much of the research on HQCs has been based in organizational research where they have been found to be instrumental in creating social capital. Research demonstrates that HQCs can positively impact learning, employee engagement, cooperation and coordination, growth and resilience, and work performance (W. Baker & Dutton, 2007; Helliwell, 2012). They are therefore instrumental to organizational performance and success. These interactions do not necessarily need to occur in the context of lasting or enduring relationships and can even occur if the interaction is short and once-off (W. Baker & Dutton, 2007). HQCs can be fostered through cognitive, emotional and behavioral mechanisms, as illustrated in Figure 4 (Stephens et al., 2012). All of these pathways represent valuable and trainable skills and should be explored in full by people looking to understand and better build
effective connections. However, in keeping with the themes of this paper and the subset of skill presented in this section, the behavioral pathways are further outlined below. These pathways include trust, mutual regard, play and task enabling (Dutton, 2003).

Figure 4. The mechanisms through which high-quality connections are cultivated (Dutton, 2003; Stephens et al., 2012)

Respectful engagement in an interaction conveys positive regard, worth and consideration for the other person (Dutton, 2003). This can be communicated in small gestures and behaviors such as in body language, eye contact and tone. Respectful engagement lifts the self-esteem of the other person and increases the likelihood that they will want to re-engage in the future (Dutton, 2003). The benefits of a HQC are not just felt by the pair involved in the interaction. One HQC could potentially have positive flow-on effects to other people and connections (Dutton, 2003). The HQC between the two colleagues, above, will likely leave each of them feeling empowered and energized to seek out positive connections with others.
Disrespectful interactions, on the other hand, reduce self-esteem and tend to make people withdraw rather than reach out to others (Dutton, 2003). Five strategies are suggested to improve respectful engagement and therefore cultivate HQCs (Dutton, 2003). As illustrated in the example, the first is conveying presence. Key to this is truly seeing the other person, engaging with them, and being open and attentive during the connection. Secondly, authenticity is also required; people can sense when others are being fake, which blocks genuine connection. Third, looking for the positive core in others and recognizing these strengths and qualities also conveys respect. Effective listening is the fourth strategy. HQCs can be fostered either by being empathic and listening to understand, rather than thinking about how one can contribute, or just waiting for an opportunity to speak. Using supportive communication techniques is the final strategy. This can be done by making requests rather than demands, and being specific and descriptive (objective) rather than evaluative of a person’s behavior (Dutton, 2003).

Task enabling is another behavioral mechanism found by Dutton (2003) to cultivate HQCs. Task enabling involves behaviors that help colleagues succeed on a task or in their role more generally (Dutton, 2003). Task enabling ties in with a lot of the work discussed later in the section on giving. This help may take a number of forms. For example, it may involve training, developing people or sharing information (Dutton, 2003). It could also entail structuring a job so that it is easier to complete (Dutton, 2003). It may encompass advocating for people, helping others navigate the political landscape of the organization or making introductions to others that can best help them (Dutton, 2003). Task enabling may also simply comprise accommodating people’s needs and requirements (e.g. extending deadlines, being compassionate about responsibilities outside of work, partnering people together to help each other on a project) (Dutton, 2003).
Trust is also important in HQCs (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). In the above example, Chris demonstrated trust when he reached out for help. Helliwell and Huang (2010) have found that trust within organizations is vital and that it dwarfs the benefits of salary and financial bonuses on life satisfaction. To quantify this, they found that workplaces where trust in leadership is one point higher (on a ten point scale) have the same positive impact on life satisfaction for their employees as a 33% increase in income (Helliwell & Huang, 2010). Trust is often built through pathways of mutual respect and task enabling, as discussed. Giving people control and a sense of autonomy builds trust, as does seeking feedback, suggestions and ideas from others and acting on this feedback (Stephens et al., 2012). The way mistakes are handled can also influence trust development. When mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities, trust is fostered (Stephens et al., 2012). However the opposite is true when mistakes are met with accusations of bad intent, or when people are demeaned for the error (Stephens et al., 2012). This will be discussed further in the context of forgiveness in organizations.

Play and fun are another pathway through which to foster strong connections with others. Play can often take people outside of themselves, outside their roles and outside of hierarchy (Stephens et al., 2012). Play brings down boundaries and helps individuals connect with people as they are, not as the role they represent (Stephens et al., 2012). The opportunity to see others in a different light often encourages individuals to learn more about others (Stephens et al., 2012). Play prompts people to be engaged in the present moment, by reducing self-consciousness (Stephens et al., 2012). This experience connects with the concept of flow, which is the subjective experience of being fully immersed in an activity and, in the process, losing a sense of self (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Stephens et al., 2012). Interestingly, engagement or flow was another of the elements common to all well-being models outlined in Table 1, which points
to its importance in positive human experience. Peterson (2006) notes that flow experiences shared between people may be relatively common and that play represents one course to achieve this. Play can represent an act of belongingness and connection through which people recognize their shared desire for love and happiness (Seppala, 2013).

There are emotional, cognitive and behavioral pathways through which people can foster high-quality connections. While these have been discussed in a predominately organizational context, there is nothing preventing people from experiencing these types of connections with loved ones, neighbors or indeed relative strangers. Having an awareness of these pathways and remaining mindful of ways to connect with others will help to lay the foundation for interactions that are energizing and positive. By fostering HQCs people are also building the resources of others (social, emotional and physical) so that they are more likely to experience these types of interactions in future. Furthermore, knowing about the contagion of well-being, HQCs represent one pathway to foster this positive transference (Fowler & Christakis, 2009).

Character Strengths.

One significant project in the field of positive psychology has been work by Peterson and Seligman (2004) to develop a classification of character strengths. Their research has lead to the identification of 24 character strengths catalogued under six universally recognized virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These strengths are thought to be the basic building blocks of human goodness, through which people are able to make a positive contribution to the world (Niemic, 2013). These character strengths can also help us to build and maintain positive relationships with others. One of the important principals of character strengths is that they require balanced expression (Niemic, 2013). Character strengths have the potential to be overused or underused. For example, if the character strength of honesty was underused it may
be perceived as phoniness, or if overused it could be perceived as righteousness (Niemic, 2013). During the discussion of character strengths, below, it is important to remember this principal as underuse or overuse of strengths would not have the same outcomes. The concept of the ‘golden mean’ is useful here, as it suggests that optimal strength use occurs with ‘the right combination of strengths, expressed to the right degree and in the right situation’ (Niemic, 2013, p. 16).

Character strengths under the broad virtue of humanity include kindness, the capacity to love and be loved, and social intelligence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These are strengths that help to foster positive, close, one-on-one relationships with others. However these humanity character strengths are not the only strengths we can use to ‘tend and befriend’ (Peterson, 2006, p. 143). Next, ways that the character strengths of gratitude, humility and forgiveness can help to develop flourishing relationships will be discussed. These represent only a sample of the character strengths that can be used to improve relationships.

**Gratitude.**

*After lunch, you and your colleagues file into the conference room for a team meeting. Your manager greets everyone and begins with a heartfelt thank you. She acknowledges how hard the team has been working to cover some absences and advises that she has been receiving some great client feedback regarding the service provided. She appreciates everyone’s commitment, teamwork and long hours.*

*Although it has been a difficult couple of weeks and the team has felt the stress of these absences, they are now all grinning at each other, glad that their contribution is valued.*

Broadly speaking, experiencing gratitude has been linked with improved health, well-being and life satisfaction (Niemic, 2013). Gratitude also has important positive impacts on relationship formation, promotion and growth. When someone receives a benefit they may feel
gratitude (‘how nice of her’), resentment (‘what does he want in return?’), misunderstood (‘why would she think I would like that’) or indebted (‘now I have to find a way to repay them’) (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010). Research shows that people are likely to feel grateful when they perceive that the benefactor is being responsive to their needs (Gordon et al., 2012). Reis, Clark and Holmes (2004) found that assessments about the thoughtfulness of the benefactor predicted gratitude in the receiver. They note that perceived responsiveness is central to feelings of intimacy and closeness. In this way, gratitude functions to build high-quality interpersonal connections (Reis et al., 2004).

Gratitude is thought to help us to 1) find, 2) remind and 3) bind us to other people (Algoe et al., 2010). 1) Find: when people feel grateful towards others they are more inclined to like them and consider investing in a relationship with them (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). 2) Remind: experiencing gratitude in existing relationships involves assessing the state of the relationship and recognizing the value of the person and the bond. 3) Bind: this results in the person feeling that the relationship is worth further investing in (Algoe et al., 2010). This assessment increases optimism for the future of the relationship. Attention is then shifted to the other person’s needs in order to foster relationship growth, commitment and security (Gordon et al., 2012). Furthermore, the feeling of being appreciated has important implications for the benefactor. Perceiving gratitude from another has been found to promote responsiveness and commitment toward the benefactor thereby creating a reciprocal upward, positive spiral of growth (Gordon et al., 2012). In considering the example at the beginning, we could imagine the possible positive impacts of this expression of appreciation on the team, such as increased team commitment, effort and engagement. Indeed, Waters (2012) found benefits in terms of both the gratitude that individual employees feel and the extent to which gratitude is organizationally
endorsed (e.g. through gratitude boards, gratitude letters). These benefits manifested as increased job satisfaction. Gratitude is important for relationship stability between romantic partners – not just in the workplace. Gordon and colleagues (2012) found that for each unit increase in appreciative feelings, people were 3.58 times more likely to remain a couple nine months later.

As mentioned previously, people can react in a variety of ways to benefactors. Algoe and colleagues (2010) were particularly interested in the differences between feelings of gratitude and indebtedness in relationships. They found that indebtedness is more closely linked with reciprocity norms (or matching behaviors), whereas gratitude is linked with a perception of care. Gratitude encourages a broader range of growth behaviors that go beyond repayment (Algoe et al., 2010). Rather, people who feel gratitude are focused on the needs of the benefactor and improving the relationship. In romantic relationships, feeling grateful has been associated with intimacy, relationship promotion, desire to spend more time together and acts of appreciation such as thanking or hugging (Algoe et al., 2010; Algoe & Haidt, 2009). How appreciation is expressed also matters. People who do this best use their felt appreciation to identify and express what they value in the person (Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013). As seen in the example above, the manager expressed her gratitude and was specific in her appreciation of the team’s commitment, teamwork and long hours. This recognition of a person’s qualities becomes a gift in itself and highlights care, understanding and validation for the other person (Algoe et al., 2013). It makes people feel understood and cherished, again creating an upward spiral (Algoe et al., 2013).

These studies indicate that gratitude fosters the development and growth of relationships. Gratitude helps to find, remind and bind people to others who are responsive to their needs.
Feeling and expressing gratitude is an example of a small behavior change that can have lasting and positive impacts on close relationships, job satisfaction and well-being. Gratitude encourages people to see and capture everyday moments as opportunities for relationship development (Algoe et al., 2010). The example provided in the beginning highlights the potential wide ranging benefits of expressing gratitude. The manager is reminded of the reasons she values her team and their hard work. The individual team members feel appreciated and valued for their contribution. And as a team they are likely to continue working hard as a cohesive unit, knowing that this is something that is appreciated by the organization.

**Humility.**

During the meeting the manager outlines a new project that the team will be undertaking. She acknowledges the good work you personally have completed on a similar project and asks if you would like to take the lead.

You are thrilled by the opportunity. This will be a great chance to develop your skills and gain some valuable experience. You thank her for the opportunity and say, ‘During the last project I was very well supported by Jerry. His expertise in complex case management was a real asset, something I do not have experience in. I would not have been able to finish the project without him. Would Jerry and I be able to work on this project together?’

‘Of course, Jerry if you are happy to work on this too?’

Smiling, Jerry agrees that he would be happy to work together.

Humility is another character strength that has been found to promote relationship formation, maintenance and growth (Van Tongeren, Davis, & Hook, 2014). As seen in the above example, humility represents an accurate perception of oneself and others and allows a person to identify and appreciate strengths in others without feeling inferior (Owens, Rowatt, &
Wilkins, 2012). On a social level, people who are humble tend to be other-focused and can manage their self-interest to cultivate other-orientated, altruistic actions in close relationships (Davis et al., 2011). Van Tongeren and colleagues (2014) found that humble potential dating partners were assessed more favorably than less humble potentials. Furthermore, humility was found to be a protective factor in long-distance relationships in that it buffered against the high likelihood of unforgiveness that is often seen in these types of relationships (Van Tongeren et al., 2014). Humility may encourage the restoration of social bonds in that people are more likely to empathize with and therefore forgive humble transgressors (Van Tongeren et al., 2014).

Furthermore, humble people are often viewed as trustworthy because of their orientation towards others and so the perceived likelihood of them transgressing in the future is lower (Van Tongeren et al., 2014).

Humility is also thought to have important benefits in the social context of organizations. Humility is associated with helping and cooperation and has been found to foster positive team outcomes (Owens et al., 2012). Owens, Johnson and Mitchell (2013) found that expressed humility was associated with increased work performance above and beyond the effects of intelligence, conscientiousness and self-efficacy. It is thought that humility encourages people to recognize and learn from positive social role-models and accept feedback to improve performance (Owens et al., 2013). Humility is also thought to foster learning behaviors that improve mastery because having a realistic view of one’s strengths and weaknesses helps humble people to accurately assess how much time and effort will be required to accomplish a performance expectation (Owens et al., 2013). Furthermore, humble leaders have been found to foster increased learning, employee engagement, job satisfaction and retention of their team members (Owens et al., 2013).
Fostering humility helps people to cultivate an orientation towards others, which is key in successful relationships. It appears that being realistic about strengths, abilities and weaknesses increases the ability to form, maintain and develop interpersonal relationships in a variety of contexts. As mentioned briefly above, humility also increases the likelihood that people will be forgiven if they transgress and this therefore helps to restore relationships. This is an example of how strengths can build on and interact with each other to help build a toolkit of skills that improve social interactions.

**Forgiveness.**

*After the meeting, Rachel asks if she can talk to you briefly.*

*She says, ‘I wanted to apologize, I made a mistake on the Johnson case.’*

*‘Ok, can you tell me what’s happened?’ you ask.*

*Rachel explains how the mistake was made. You thank her for letting you know, you assure her not to worry and ask her what she plans to do. Rachel outlines a plan on how she will fix the mistake. You acknowledge the thought she’s put into resolving the issue, offer your support if she needs it and ask her to let you know how it goes.*

Forgiveness is an intentional response to an offence (often a violation of a relationship norm) that interrupts or prevents a destructive cycle of action and reaction (Bright & Exline, 2012; Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Forgiveness has been studied across interpersonal contexts, noting that it is often one of the most difficult tasks in ongoing relationships (Finkel et al., 2002). Forgiveness is especially important in the context of close interpersonal relationships as multiple transgressions are likely to occur in the course of a relationship and, if unmanaged, they have the potential to disrupt the bond (Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004). Forgiveness is beneficial to both the individual and the relationship.
in that a greater tendency to forgive is associated with relationship satisfaction (Kachadourian et al., 2004). Forgiveness is more commonly a character strength in partners with a pro-relationship motivation - being strongly committed to a relationship facilitates forgiveness (Finkel et al., 2002). This in turn inhibits motivations to react to offences with destructive behaviors, neglect or exit (Finkel et al., 2002). Many of the relationship skills discussed in this paper increase relationship commitment, which therefore further contributes to people’s ability and capacity to forgive. Finkel and colleagues (2002) suggest that when people have the most to lose (e.g. a cherished spouse or friend), they are more likely to forgive in order to hold onto the relationship. Forgiveness is often facilitated through sincere apologies because this signals an intention to repay the interpersonal debt (Bright & Exline, 2012).

In organizations, forgiveness can be useful for pragmatic or transcendent reasons. As discussed, from a pragmatic standpoint forgiveness in organizations is necessary to ensure the continuation of ongoing relationships (Bright & Exline, 2005). The example earlier illustrates this from a transcendent standpoint—forgiveness can be a means to learn from difficult interpersonal moments or organizational errors and encourage positive transformations moving forward (Bright & Exline, 2012). This orientation towards forgiveness can be supported through organizational climate, policies and practices that encourage dialogue, and an appreciation for others’ perspectives (Bright & Exline, 2012). A culture of forgiveness communicates to employees that mistakes and errors are experiences to be learned from. Managing mistakes well can also assist employees in developing clear understandings of organizational expectations (Nussbaum, 2007).
Touch

Your partner opens the door as you’re about to put the key in the lock.

‘Hi honey, how was your day?’

‘Busy but good,’ you reply.

‘I’m just going to grab dessert for the party tonight.’

‘Ok, thanks,’ you say as you give him a big hug, standing there together for a minute or so. As you stand there you feel your shoulders relax and your breathing slow. It feels good to just take a moment together.

Touch can play a key role in relationships by providing a way to communicate and by positively impacting health and the release of hormones. Touch is a way to convey support and affection for others, whether this is through hugs, pats on the back, hand-holding or high fives (Light, Grewen, & Amico, 2005). Increased physical affection has been linked with relationship and partner satisfaction and conflict resolution (Gulledge, Gulledge, & Stahmanmn, 2003). Clipman conducted a study finding that students who were assigned to give a minimum of five hugs per day over a period of four weeks became happier than a control group who were asked to record how many hours of reading they did per day (as cited in Lyubomirsky, 2008).

Touch is good for health with positive impacts being observed on decreased blood pressure and heart rate, increased vagal tone, decreased depressive symptoms, increased oxytocin (‘love’ hormone) and decreased cortisol (‘stress’ hormone) levels (Field, 2010). Light and colleagues (2005) found that more frequent hugs between romantic partners were associated with an increased baseline level of oxytocin and decreased blood pressure and heart rate. Furthermore, Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham and Light (2008) found that when married couples engaged in a four-week touch intervention, involving touch and massage, three times a week,
that oxytocin levels rose. Increased oxytocin is beneficial for a number of reasons; it helps people attune to others (e.g. eyes and smiles); and to better understand people’s feelings; it increases feelings of trust and affection for others; magnifies opportunities for social connection; increases pain thresholds and reduces feelings of anxiety and depression (Fredrickson, 2013). In short, touch provides resources to better foster flourishing relationships.

Touch also represents a means of non-verbal communication and emotional signaling (Hertenstein, Keltner, App, Bulleit, & Jaskolka, 2006). Hertenstein and colleagues (2006) found that six emotions (love, gratitude, sympathy, anger, fear and disgust) could be identified at a better rate than chance (as high as 78% accuracy) from only a brief, one-second touch on the forearm from a stranger. This study demonstrates that pro-social intentions can be signaled through touch, thereby facilitating cooperation and connection with others (Hertenstein et al., 2006). This has been further supported by studies that demonstrate the positive responses to touch in different situations. For example, Guéguen and Fischer-Loukou (2003) found that female confederates who briefly touched a bus driver’s arm when asking for a ticket were more likely to receive a free ride than those confederates who did not touch the drivers arm. Similar effects have been demonstrated in the classroom, with a brief touch on the arm increasing student willingness to volunteer in class and also improving positive attitudes towards the teacher (Guéuen, 2004; Legg & Wilson, 2012). Touch has also been implicated in pro-social motivations because in cross-cultural studies, increases in rates of touching have been linked with decreased physical and verbal aggression (Field, 1999).

Touch is the least understood of the senses (Field, 2010). While these and other preliminary studies are promising, very little is known regarding the role of touch in the formation, development and flourishing of relationships (Field, 2010). In many cases, especially
in low-touch societies like the US, interpersonal touch is firmly discouraged due to a fear of litigation or child abuse accusations (Field, 2010). However, given the social and health benefits of touch more research is necessary to understand these cultural differences and determine when touch is helpful rather than harmful. Further research could also help elucidate how to use touch to signal our positive intentions while also helping people to ‘read’ touch more effectively.

**Positivity Resonance**

*Your friends arrive as you are pulling dinner out of the oven.*

‘Perfect timing,’ you say, taking off the oven mitts to give your friend, Julie a hug.

‘It’s so nice to see you,’ she says.

‘You too!’

‘Can I give you a hand with anything?’ she asks.

‘Would you mind please popping the plates on the table? How was your day?’

*She walks the plates over to the table as she recounts a crazy story of a man pulling a roll of paper towel from the bottom of the pile at the supermarket. You are both in fits of laughter as your partners walk into the kitchen. Wiping away the tears, you consider how grateful you are for how she can always make you laugh and feel better.*

Fredrickson (2013) has recently offered a broadened definition of love; love that encompasses social connection with any potential partner – spouse, family, friends, colleagues, neighbors and even strangers. It does not refer to the experience of love as a commitment or a bond but rather suggests that relationships and bonds are a product of many experiences of love over time. Under this definition love is not exclusive, lasting nor unconditional. Rather, Fredrickson (2013) suggests, each person’s experience of love is momentary, yet infinitely renewable.
Much of Fredrickson’s work has been on the study of positive emotions, e.g. gratitude, hope, and serenity. Her research has demonstrated that a key purpose of positive emotions is to ‘broaden and build’. This is opposed to negative emotions which are intended to narrow people’s focus to devote energy to a particular problem (Fredrickson, 2009). Positive emotions ‘broaden’ viewpoints - they allow people to take a more holistic and open view and this encourages flexibility, attunement, creativity and better judgment (Fredrickson, 2009). Experiences of positive emotion also ‘build’ like a resource, in that people become more knowledgeable, healthier, more connected to others and more resilient the more they experience positive emotion (Fredrickson, 2009). The experience of positive emotions are also self-perpetuating and they can encourage upward cycles of growth that can ultimately lead to flourishing (Fredrickson, 2009).

Love, by Fredrickson’s (2012) definition, is any shared social experience of positive emotion; a micro-moment of warmth and connection that is shared with another person. Fredrickson notes that love is first felt in the sharing of this positive emotion. The experience results in a synchronicity between the individuals’ biochemistry and behaviors, and an orientation toward the other person’s well-being characterizing mutual care (Fredrickson, 2013). These types of interactions are described as positivity resonance (Fredrickson, 2013). Fredrickson (2013) is very clear that these moments require physical connection to foster behavioral synchrony (e.g. eye contact, touch, laughter). Otherwise, the moment is an independent experience of positive emotion. Positivity resonance requires a shared experience of positive emotion; where each person feels as the other does, their actions align, they are attuned and each experiences a reverberation of positive emotion (Fredrickson, 2013). Trust is encouraged when people experience positivity resonance. The trust deepens the connection and
fosters increased interaction (Fredrickson, 2013). As this bond strengthens the individual is also more likely to experience ongoing moments of positivity resonance with the other person, due to that foundation of connection and trust (Fredrickson, 2013).

Positivity resonance is the same whether experienced with a friend, spouse or stranger. The difference in close relationships is the frequency of these experiences. Each experience of love can create new bonds and, as the frequency increases, a tighter relationship and increased intimacy are fostered (Fredrickson, 2013). This highlights the transformational nature of positivity resonance; as social ties become closer (through shared history, security and trust), people experience more positivity resonance and become even closer (Fredrickson, 2013). Experiencing positivity resonance also has positive implications for people’s biology by increasing oxytocin and vagal tone (which has positive implications for physical health) (Fredrickson, 2013). Fredrickson (2013) does not dismiss the role of negative emotions, which grab people’s attention and help them to address issues in relationships and life more broadly. However, she argues that the experience of positive emotions increases resilience, so that negative emotions can be handled with grace, perspective and flexibility (Fredrickson, 2013).

It appears that negative emotions in social relations are, to a large extent, inevitable. However, positive emotions help to protect against the ongoing hurt and pain of such moments (Fredrickson, 2013). For example, in a study of married couples, only the amount of positive affect experienced within a conflict predicted levels of stability and happiness because it served to deescalate negativity (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). Conflict is inevitable in relationships; however, boosting positive affect represents one proactive way to manage this conflict and help generate some beneficial outcomes when it arises.

In another study, Fredrickson (2013) found that when people practiced loving-kindness
meditation (meditation designed to increase capacity for love and kindness) participants experienced more positive emotions (e.g. more love, more serenity, more joy). The meditation also fed the participants connections with others, which then positively impacted their physical health (Fredrickson, 2013). These findings suggest that if people can find ways to foster warm connections with others (whether through meditation or otherwise) they can create positive changes in their lives that far extend the positive impact of the interaction itself.

Positivity resonance also appears to have important implications in organizational contexts. In a review of the organizational literature, Rhee and Jung Yoon (2012) identified a range of positive social processes that result from shared positive affect, namely, increased cooperation and coordination, reduced conflict, strengthened relationships between leaders and teams, and reduced absenteeism. They note that repeated experiences of positivity resonance in the workplace can result in the creation of a norm for team affect or a ‘group affective tone’ (Rhee & Jung Yoon, 2012, p. 217). A positive group affective tone has been associated with increased job satisfaction, cooperation and performance and decreased task and emotional conflict (Barsade, Ward, Turner, & Sonnenfield, 2000). Again, negative emotions are useful and necessary, especially in the context of critical, logical and cognitive processes, but a history and preponderance towards positive emotion can again help to undo any detrimental impact of negative affect (Rhee & Jung Yoon, 2012).

The Michelangelo Phenomenon

‘How’s your theatre group going?’ you ask your friend

‘It’s great, we’re about to run auditions for a production of “Much Ado About Nothing”.’

‘Oh, Mike, you should audition,’ you encourage your partner.

He laughs and says he couldn’t.
'Go on Mike, you would be great,' you say. Continuing, you tell everyone, 'Mike loves theatre, he was in lots of plays as a kid and has been telling me he would like to get back into it.' He smiles at you and says, 'Alright I’ll give it a go.'

The Michelangelo phenomenon refers to a process in close relationships whereby partners influence and shape each other over time, in ways that bring them closer to their ideal selves (Drigotas, 2002). The concept is that this occurs in a similar way to a sculptor chiseling stone to reveal a masterpiece (Drigotas, 2002), by helping bring out the best of the individual. The ideal self represents a possible image to which the individual aspires (Drigotas, 2002). In general, the alignment of actual selves with people’s ideal selves fosters a positive impact on well-being (Lyubomirsky, 2008). When out of alignment, however, this cognitive dissonance can produce frustration and sadness (Drigotas, 2002; Lyubomirsky, 2008). Through a process of continual interaction, people may move towards their ideal self, based on whether their partner’s behaviors encourage or reduce particular tendencies. Overtime this can influence actions, goals and even traits (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999). Greater alignment or self-improvement occurs through the interdependent nature of the relationship and the collaboration of partners produces personal development (Drigotas et al., 1999).

The Michelangelo phenomenon comes about through a system of expectations and reinforcements. The degree to which a person’s image of their partner’s ideal self matches their own is called, partner perceptual affirmation (Drigotas et al., 1999). As outlined in Figure 5, partner perceptual affirmation differs on a continuum such that a partner’s perceptions may be in opposition to the ideal self or aligned and affirming the ideal self.
This affirmation can either be conscious or unconscious (Drigotas et al., 1999). If the partner affirms the ideal self, this can lead to perceived partner behavioral affirmation, where the partner can encourage movement towards the ideal self. This may occur through retroactive selection, in which a partner may reward or penalize particular behaviors, goals or preferences. As illustrated in the beginning example, it may also occur preemptively through actions that inhibit or elicit particular behaviors, goals or preferences. Relatedly, a partner may create situations in the relationship where particular behaviors, goals or preferences become more (or less) prevalent through situation selection (Drigotas et al., 1999). Drigotas and colleagues (1999) found that the association between perceived partner perceptual affirmation and movement towards the ideal self only occurs with perceived partner affirmation. The Michelangelo phenomenon is also thought to be helpful in an organizational context, especially in high-quality mentoring (Ragins, 2012). A similar process of perceptual and behavioral affirmations can strengthen the mentoring relationship and create a process through which mentees move towards their ideal, professional selves (Ragins, 2012).

Research has highlighted a range of benefits when partners idealize their spouses. Murray, Homes and Griffin (1996) found that relationships in which partners idealized each
other were more likely to be sustainable. Furthermore, the Michelangelo phenomenon is also associated with increased relationship satisfaction and well-being, as well as, decreased conflict and doubts (Drigotas et al., 1999; Murray et al., 1996). Within an idealized relationship, partners also come to view themselves in an idealized light and, in this way, relationships progress in the direction of these images (Murray et al., 1996b).

The associated increase in well-being and relationship satisfaction is thought to come about for a number of reasons. First, having a spouse who idealizes their partner demonstrates empathy and enhances feelings of love in that the partner feels that they are seen in the way they want (Drigotas et al., 1999). This process also helps to coordinate and organize the relationship. Since both partners are working towards the ideal, a sense of harmony and adjustment is created (Drigotas et al., 1999). Another reason behind the benefits of idealized relationships is that a partner who is affirming, helps the person to be the best version of themselves. This encourages a degree of self-satisfaction, gratification and contentment for the person, knowing that ‘I’m a better person when I’m with you’ (Drigotas et al., 1999, p. 295). As Drigotas (2002) points out, in some relationships the perceptions of a person’s partner can help them to flourish and become better versions of themselves, thus also strengthening the bond and the satisfaction they feel in the relationship.

Giving

‘How’s work going Tim?’ your partner asks.

‘Not very well actually, I’m thinking it might be time to make a move,’ he replies.

‘Into a different career or just a different organization?’

‘I’ve actually been thinking I’d like to get into recruiting but I’m not sure whether my skills would be transferrable.’
“I have a friend who manages a recruitment firm,’ you say, ‘I’ll introduce you if you like?’

‘Really, that would be great! Thank you.’

‘Absolutely. She’ll be able to give you more information about the industry and might be able to point you towards the best companies to work for, if they are not hiring. I’ll give her a call tomorrow.’

There has been significant research on how the process of giving in romantic, personal and professional relationships may affect relationship outcomes, well-being and organizational success. In all contexts it appears that an orientation towards others and their well-being and success is pivotal in fostering and developing flourishing relationships. Grant (2013) suggests that people develop a tendency to give, take or match with others. Givers are focused on others and are motivated by giving more than they get. Takers are self-interested and put their own needs above others. Matchers are interested in fairness and like to give as much as they get. Grant’s (2013) research indicates that, in the long run, givers who are able to give (while being able to accept help from others when needed) are more successful than either takers or matchers. He suggests that this is because the success of a giver has positive flow on effects to others. These ‘otherish’ givers create value rather than claiming it and, therefore, their success enhances the success of those around them (Grant, 2013).

Hadden, Smith and Knee (2014) studied compassionate goals in the context of romantic relationships. Compassionate goals involve the help and support of others without consideration of the possible returns for the self (Crocker & Canevello, 2008 as cited in Hadden et al., 2014). Compassionate goals characterize a communal relationship in which immediate reciprocity is not expected from a partner when giving (Kogan et al, 2010). Competing interests exist within
relationships such that, from time to time, the interests and needs of a partner, friend or colleague may conflict with a person’s own, e.g. working longer hours to support one’s partner through school. People who are higher in compassionate goals desire to promote the needs of their partner while ensuring they don’t act in ways that might be hurtful to their partner (Hadden et al, 2014). The researchers found that by feeling connected and supported by their partner, people experienced an increase in compassionate goals, which in turn predicted an increase in their partner’s relationship satisfaction (Hadden et al., 2014). In terms of the intrapersonal benefits of giving, Kogan and colleagues (2010) found that people with higher communal strength toward their partners felt authentic in their acts of giving towards their partner. This authenticity predicted the experience of positive emotion and daily relationship satisfaction. The research suggests that there is a reciprocal cycle of giving in relationships that further supports compassionate goals. Reis, Clark & Holmes (2004) point out that acts of giving to particular people in a social network is often based on communal strength. Those in a person’s inner circle (e.g. partners, immediate family) are the strongest in terms of communal strength. The closer a person is to the edge of one’s network e.g. neighbor or stranger, the progressively weaker the level of communal strength becomes. This reflects a social norm - that people are expected to be more responsive to people as the levels of relationship become more exclusive (Reis, Clark & Holmes, 2004).

Impett, Gable and Peplau (2005) have presented further research to clarify the types of compassionate goals that might be associated with positive relationships. They wanted to identify when, if ever, it might be detrimental to sacrifice for one’s partner. Impett and colleagues (2005) distinguish between approach and avoidance motives for sacrifice in relationships. Approach motives for sacrifice or giving involve motives to support their partner’s...
well-being or the relationship overall (e.g. to increase the partner’s happiness, to demonstrate their love). Avoidance motives for sacrifice or giving involve avoiding negative reactions from the partner, negative impacts on the relationship, or negative internal feelings (e.g. to prevent conflict, to reduce guilt, to stop the partner from feeling upset or angry). On days when one partner gives based on approach motives, Impett and colleagues (2005) found associations with increased positive emotions, improved satisfaction with life, higher relationship quality and decreased relationship conflict. They also found that increased sacrifice based on approach motives was associated with relationship commitment (Impett et al., 2005). Sacrifice for avoidance motives was associated with the opposite outcomes, namely increased negative emotions, decreased life and relationship satisfaction and increased relationship conflict (Impett et al., 2005). Furthermore, participants with predominately avoidance goals were more likely to have broken up at one-month follow up. These results indicate that relationship flourishing is built through a trust in one’s partner to give support to them (or to the relationship), rather than simply avoiding conflict or disapproval (Impett et al., 2005). A selfless orientation towards others, rather than the more selfish avoidance of negative impact to one’s self, is likely to support relationship development.

Baker and Dutton (2007) propose a model of giving in a broader network. This is known as generalized reciprocity and involves a system of exchange that benefits members within a particular network (Baker & Dutton, 2007). Generalized reciprocity operates on a principle that people should gives to others (even people they don’t know) without immediately expecting something in return. They then trust that eventually someone else will give to or support them when they need it (W. Baker & Dutton, 2007). In this way, networks (organizations in particular) create a pool of goodwill and a culture of giving (W. Baker & Dutton, 2007). A
number of organizational benefits result from this, such as increased density of networks (therefore access to increased resources), increased trust, an increased likelihood of further giving, cost reductions, decreased duplication in processes and time savings (Baker & Dutton, 2007).

While giving is important in personal and professional relationships, it appears that for optimum outcomes, giving cannot be one-sided. Sometimes referred to as the Benjamin Franklin effect, Jecker and Landy (1969) found that doing a favor for a person increased feelings of liking for them. This increase in liking was not observed in people who were not asked to do a favor. Therefore, it is thought that by allowing friends, partners and colleagues an opportunity to contribute, their investment in the relationship will also increase. Additionally, giving and receiving help appears to be important for building trust (Seymour, Gregg, Welch, & Collett, 2014). Seymour and colleagues (2014) sampled affiliates and members of a congregation and found that members were more likely to trust other parishioners if they had given or received help from these other members. The highest boost to levels of trust were for those members who had both given and received help; they were eight times more likely to trust fellow members than those who had neither given nor received help (Seymour et al., 2014). In Grant’s (2013) distinction between otherish and selfless givers, selfless givers are those that give without considering themselves and who have trouble accepting help from others. These givers are at a higher risk of burnout (Grant, 2013). This finding highlights the importance of each person looking after their own well-being so that they can invest in and build relationships with others. This is demonstrated in otherish givers who tend to accept help from others, as well as cultivate a support network that they can access when needed (Grant, 2013). These findings lend support to the conceptualization of the VIA character strength of love as including both the capacity to love
and the capacity to be loved (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It appears that giving and accepting care, love and help from others, helps to foster close bonds, trusting relationships and increased relationship satisfaction.

Social Support

As you are packing the dishwasher after dinner, Julie is telling you that they have finalized their travel planning for a trip to Germany in August.

‘What are you doing with your dog while you’re away?’ you ask.

‘Tim’s looking into kennels,’ she replies.

‘Has he been able to find a good one?’ you ask.

‘Not really actually,’ Julie replies, ‘there aren’t many nearby and we’ve been warned against a few of them.’

‘Mike and I could look after him for you,’ you offer.

‘Really? That would be a huge relief. If you’re sure it’s not too much trouble, we’d really appreciate it.’

‘We would be happy to,’ you assure her.

In the study of well-being and relationships, social support has been noted as particularly important (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). Social support is thought to boost well-being by decreasing the prevalence of stressors (or perceived stressors) and through shielding individuals from the negative effects of stressful events when they happen (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). Social support is a process in relationships that involves one person seeking support and the other providing care (Collins & Feeney, 2000). To distinguish between social support and giving, giving can be present in many circumstances, whereas social support is provided in times of stress (or perceived stress). Therefore all forms of social support are acts of giving but not all acts of
giving are social support. Social support was discussed briefly above in the context of giving, noting that social support can be protective of burnout (Grant, 2013). Research has found that, in terms of positive health outcomes, giving social support may be more beneficial than receiving it (Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, & Smith, 2003). The various types of social support that can be provided are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2.

Outline of the four attributes of social support (Hinson Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997, pp. 96-97).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes of social support</th>
<th>Definition and application</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support</td>
<td>Provision of care, empathy, love and trust. Conveys liking, admiration, respect, belonging and love.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental support</td>
<td>Provision of tangible goods, services or aid. Concrete assistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational support</td>
<td>Provision of advice, suggestions and information to assist problem solving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal support</td>
<td>Provision of affirmation to reassure that they have or will act appropriately</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Collins and Feeney (2000) recognize that not all stressful events will require social support; the higher the perceived stress the more likely one partner will be to seek help and support from their partner. They discovered that the joint interactions of seekers and caregivers are important in terms of perceptions of social support (Collins & Feeney, 2000). To perceive social support seekers need, a) to seek support successfully (e.g. being clear and open rather than hinting or sulking) and b) perceive that their caregiver respond appropriately to their request (Collins & Feeney, 2000). The reaction of the partner to this help-seeking behavior is important in terms of perception of social support. Behaviors that indicate concern, comprehension and
reassurance, as well as the provision of aid, will be perceived as supportive, whereas if a partner is dismissive or critical this is viewed as unsupportive (Collins & Feeney, 2000). In the provision of social support, partner responsiveness is vital in that the type of support sought should match the support provided. An example of a support match would be one partner expressing emotional distress, matched by the other providing emotional support. Collins and Feeney (2000) found that perceptions of social support improved the emotional well-being of the seeker. Continued social support across time helps people to manage their concerns and this may contribute to longer-term outcomes, such as health and well-being (Collins & Feeney, 2000). Social support in a relational context contributes to the establishment and development of trust and security within the relationship (Collins & Feeney, 2000). Collins and Feeney (2000) found evidence for a reciprocal impact on relationship quality and satisfaction, as a result of providing social support. In this study, the researchers found that social support was both a predictor and outcome of relationship quality and satisfaction (Collins & Feeney, 2000). As relationships become stronger, people experience an increase in concern for their partner and increased motivation to respond (Collins & Feeney, 2000). When intimacy, value and confidence increase in a relationship, the capacity to both provide social support and to accept it increases (Collins & Feeney, 2000).

Focusing on how to support others can help to strengthen and develop bonds. As discussed in the context of HQCs, in an organizational setting, social support is typically seen through task enabling. With close bonds in the workplace there may be more focus on personal support as well as professional assistance. The research indicates that focusing on how people can support others creates a reciprocated support system, meaning that people will more likely be there for them when needed.
The Hive Hypothesis

For the most part, this paper has presented research about how to foster healthy connections and relationships one-on-one. Even in discussions regarding how this research might apply in organizations, the focus has remained on dyads – how one-on-one interpersonal connections might cumulatively have positive impacts on the organization as a whole. There is a growing area of research interest looking at how the sociality of a large network can influence well-being. This research explores relationships on a different scale. Although large social networks are an external condition and a feature of the environment that is often less momentary and more enduring, an introduction to this literature is warranted.

One way that healthy group environments have been described is through the hive hypothesis. Haidt and colleagues (2008) draw parallels between humans and bees, noting that like bees, people can dampen their sense of self, in order to focus on the greater good of their social group. Drawing from work on group selection and sociobiology (Wilson & Wilson, 2007), Haidt and colleagues (2008) note that cultural evolution is just as influential in human development, and that cultural changes intertwine with genetic evolution. As discussed, we have evolved to form groups, and the groups that have survived and prospered are those demonstrating greatest cooperation among their constituents (Haidt et al., 2008). Close-knit groups look out for their members, share resources and tasks, and can rely on the best thinkers to face challenges as they arise (Helliwell, 2012).

Haidt and colleagues (2008) believe that, rather than just focusing on dyadic relationships, people also need to be part of a community that has common values and norms in order to live a flourishing life. They suggest that by conforming to the limits and behavioral norms of a group, it allows people to pursue their own goals and find fulfillment within those
boundaries. The hive hypothesis essentially proposes that fostering our ‘inner bee’ is a path to human flourishing (Haidt et al., 2008). An individual can flourish within larger social groups, providing they are willing to subvert their sense of self, to instead focus on the goals of the group when necessary. Haidt and colleagues (2008) note that empirical research is yet to determine whether the hive hypothesis is supported. If it is, there are interesting and consequential implications for community, legal, and policy interventions designed to foster well-being. As research in this area continues to grow, investigators are getting clues on how to foster these types of integrated, positive networks.

Haidt and colleagues (2008) suggest that synchronous collective activities within a group context can act as a hive switch, encouraging the expression of individuality to subside in deference to a sense that the collective interest is more important for the present moment. These synchronous collective activities (such as dance, tai chi or group singing) decrease the salience of difference between individuals. Activities that include synchronous movement can create ‘collective effervescence’, where the events not only create joy but also help ensure the group remains cohesive (Haidt et al., 2008). Research on synchronicity or mimicry lends support to this hypothesis. Vacharkulksemsuk & Fredrickson (2012) found that self-disclosure fostered behavioral synchrony between strangers, which predicted increased ratings of energy, common experience and positivity in the interaction. Behavioural synchrony enhanced rapport and the quality of the interaction by fostering a sense of oneness between the parties (Vacharkulksemsuk & Fredrickson, 2012). In three studies, Wiltermuth and Heath (2009) found that synchronous activities in a group setting (movement and/or singing) fostered increased cooperation, felt similarity within the group and trust when compared to a control group. In these particular studies they failed to find evidence for ‘collective effervescence’; the
synchronous activities did not have any positive effect on happiness (Wiltermuth & Heath, 2009). However, this may have been a reflection of the activities that the groups were asked to do (fairly benign, simplified tasks). An interesting suggestion is to look at the impacts of synchronous movement in terms of laughter in groups (Dunbar et al., 2012). Dunbar and colleagues (2012) propose that due to the synchronicity of social laughter and the subsequent endorphins that are released that this may enhance pro-social or altruistic behavior. This research question awaits further investigation.

A concept called I-Sharing is an area of further research exploring what happens when individuals experience a decrease in boundaries between themselves and other people. I-Sharing is the sense that others have shared in identical subjective experiences (Pinel, Long, Landau, Alexander, & Pyszczynski, 2006). People report I-sharing when they feel they have an identical response to the same stimulus e.g. laughing at the same joke, giving the same answer to a question in unison, crying at the same movie (Pinel et al., 2006). I-Sharing can also be fostered retrospectively, when people recollect and discuss similar reactions to the same past event (e.g. responses to a soccer match), or when someone sees a connection between their subjective experience and that of an author of a song, painting or story (Pinel et al., 2006). Like Haidt and colleagues (2008), Pinel and colleagues (2006) argue that this crossing over between people creates a heightened sense of connection. They liken it to the positive experience of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and hypothesize that the loss of self experienced through I-sharing is a similarly positive experience. Pinel and colleagues (2006) found that I-sharing with another person increased their liking of one another, even if the other person was objectively dissimilar from them (e.g. a different nationality). I-Sharing represents a strategy then to increase bonding within groups, between members who consider themselves dissimilar. Pinel and colleagues
SOCIAL FLOURISHING

(2006) suggest that repeated interactions of this kind with a particular person can foster the belief that they are similar and that they have similar subjective experiences. I-sharing can be used to reduce intergroup tension (Pinel, Long, Landau, & Pyszczynski, 2004). Pinel and colleagues (2004) suggest that superordinate goals represent a form of I-sharing and can therefore reduce intergroup tension and promote cooperation. I-sharing represents a strategy to help people within a group to focus in a similar direction to achieve shared objectives (Pinel et al., 2004).

What does this mean? The hive hypothesis is likely most applicable in group settings like organizations, community groups or communities more broadly. Further empirical evidence is required to support the hive hypothesis, as well as, activities and interventions that might act as a hive switch. It poses interesting implications in the meantime, about cohesiveness, collaboration and connection. Whether through synchronous movement or shared subjective experiences, there are many possible benefits of understanding how to cultivate groups that feel close, mutually understood and perceive that they are experiencing the world in similar ways. Such groups may foster individuals who, 1) like each other more, and 2) show increased collaboration and connection (Pinel et al., 2004). This would foster groups that are more than the sum of their parts and it may lead to improved outcomes (that individuals alone could not achieve), and could represent a pathway to greater flourishing.

When Positive Relationship Behaviors Might not be Positive

The above sections have summarized a number of relational skills that can be employed to foster positive social bonds. However, as has been mentioned previously, while positive relationships are important for well-being, negative relationships may have deleterious effects on well-being. Research indicates that engaging in some of the positive behaviors discussed in this paper may have counterproductive impacts in relationships characterized by serious problems.
For example, feeling gratitude for a partner who is also being abusive may be detrimental if not dangerous (Gordon et al., 2012). McNulty and colleagues (2010) conducted a review of four longitudinal studies of newlyweds and found evidence that negative behaviors in those relationships with severe problems were associated with relationship satisfaction. They found that lowered expectations, less positive attributions, more negative behavior and less forgiveness in these relationships was beneficial. They propose that this may be because these behaviors helps couples to be more realistic and therefore devote more time to recognizing, tackling and resolving their problems (McNulty, 2010). This finding points to the importance of considering context and relationship history when recommending relationship strategies.

This research also highlights the need to remain honest and realistic in relationships. The positive behaviors outlined in this paper need to be implemented in a real and authentic manner and at appropriate times. Continuing to give to partners who don’t reciprocate, or forgiving partners who don’t respect or care for their partners or the relationship, is not what this paper is recommending. Rather, it’s suggested that people use a combination of strategies to improve relationships while also recognizing there is a time to address negative behaviors. Implementing positive behaviors in damaging relationships can negatively impact well-being (L. R. Baker, McNulty, Overall, Lambert, & Fincham, 2012). Therefore continuing research is necessary to further understand under which circumstances and in which contexts these positive relationship behaviors contribute to relationship growth and well-being (L. R. Baker et al., 2012). It is also suggested that when teaching positive relationship skills and interventions that this needs to be done in a nuanced way, considerate of context and history. People need to learn how to master these skills while cultivating the ability to use them flexibly, appropriately and accurately.

**Implications**
To summarize, positive relationships are key to boosting well-being and promoting good health (Peterson, 2006). As discussed throughout the paper, there is a range of positive behaviors that can be implemented to help develop and strengthen bonds with others. Below is a short summary of the takeaways for relationship health from this paper.

- **Try new things together.** Exciting and novel activities are great ways to further bond with partners, friends and colleagues. When thinking about date nights think about trying new things or undertaking activities that require cooperation (e.g. dancing). Make time for friends and try new things together. At work, try and incorporate fun activities into the day. Spend disposable income on social experiences or material things that will bring people together.

- **Show your enthusiasm.** Showing your interest and enthusiasm for other people’s news will let them know that you are invested in them, that you recognize their strengths and that they matter. Help others celebrate their good news and achievements and help them re-experience the positive emotions that they felt during the experience. Consider how you currently celebrate good news with others and if there are ways to further celebrate, do it! Find people who are excited for you and share your good news with them.

- **Connect, be present with others.** Seek out opportunities to have high-quality connections with friends, family, colleagues and even strangers. If we are actively searching for these types of connections we are likely to experience more and, in turn, appreciate them more. Be present with people, listen, support and respect them. Demonstrate your trustworthiness - make good on your word. Play! Create space for more fun at work and at home.
• **Use your strengths.** Use your signature character strengths to find ways to further bond with others. For example, if you love learning, find a friend who shares this passion and talk about the new things you have learnt. If you are creative, brainstorm new project ideas with friends. Develop other character strengths to find new ways that you can connect with others.

• **Say thanks.** Research shows that what we appreciate in life grows, so bring more of the good stuff into your relationships. Take time to consider how your partner, friends and colleagues contribute to your life. Think about the joy, love and support that they provide you. Tell them what they mean to you! Show your appreciation.

• **Be humble.** Try to see situations from other people’s perspectives. Be concerned for the well-being of others and consider how you can contribute to them. Be realistic about your own abilities and consider how to connect with others that you can work well with. Let others know that you recognize and value their strengths.

• **Cultivate forgiveness.** Forgiveness is key in relationships. If you’ve wronged someone, apologize sincerely and offer to make amends. If someone else has offended you, take time to consider the value of the relationship and the importance that the relationship continues. If the relationship is important to you this is likely to foster feelings of forgiveness.

• **Hug more.** Try and give eight hugs a day (Zak, 2011). Consider getting a massage, to releases oxytocin, which often encourages us to bond with others.

• **Seek out love.** Look for opportunities for positivity resonance - every social interaction you have with someone could be one of these moments. Consider trying loving-kindness meditation.
• **Help others reach their goals.** Support your partner, friends and colleagues to achieve their goals. Find out more about what they are working towards and see how you can help them get there.

• **Give what you can, when you can.** Give in a way that supports your loved ones and the relationship you have with them. Graciously accept help from others, allow them to invest in the relationship too. Invest in your own well-being so that you are better able to give to others.

• **Be there for other people.** Support the people in your life, as a shoulder to cry on, being their cheerleader, or keeping in touch. The support you provide may be visible or invisible but make sure that it is tailored to what the person needs from you.

• **Find your hive.** Find a group or community that you can contribute to and that you feel like contributes to your well-being and growth.

**Conclusion**

Positive psychology seeks to understand conditions, processes and activities that contribute to well-being. One of the best ways to cultivate well-being is to foster more positive social interactions with others and over time create flourishing and lasting bonds. Research shows that by focusing on others, prioritizing the connection or relationship, and fostering warm momentary interactions, that people have the capacity to foster upward spirals of growth and fulfillment (Fredrickson, 2013). Positive interactions and relationships have the capacity to have a reciprocal impact in that during these interactions people are fostering resilience, social resources and improved cognitive functioning in both themselves and others (Fredrickson, 2013). It is not clear how far these positive spirals extend. Given what is known about social networks and social contagion, there is growing evidence to suggest that positive interactions with one
person could potentially spiral out to positively impact the lives of people they have never met (Fowler & Christakis, 2009).

With particular reference to research and theories from the field of positive psychology, this paper has sought to summarize some of the interdisciplinary contributions that can assist in building flourishing relationships. The paper has focused on practical, relationship-enhancing applications of this research to provide suggestions on how flourishing interactions and relationships may be further fostered. A key component of all of these applications was a focus on other people. The value of social relationships and networks may be less about what each person gains from them personally and more about what people can build and create in collaboration with others (Stephens et al., 2012). There are significant personal and even society level benefits from doing so. Furthermore, the investment in others and relationships is never final, instead it is the ways that people interact with others over time that foster successful relationships. There are no quick fixes and the quality and health of relationships only reflect a point in time (Stephens et al., 2012). Therefore people must continue to invest, play, support, love and appreciate others because the good life necessitates the realization that ‘other people matter’ (Peterson, 2006, p. 249).
References


Field, T. (1999). American adolescents touch each other less and are more aggressive toward their peers as compared with French adolescents. Adolescence, 34(136), 753-758.


Cambridge.


Niemic, R. M. (2013). VIA character strengths: Research and practice (The first 10 years). In H. H. Knoop & A. Delle Fave (Eds.), *Well-being and cultures: Perspectives on positive psychology* (pp. 11-30). New York: Springer.


