Interactive Journaling as a Positive Intervention: Examining an Established Practice Through the Lens of Positive Psychology

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Abstract
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Keywords
positive interventions, expressive writing, journaling, Interactive Journaling, workbooks, motivational interviewing, cognitive-behavioral therapy, positive psychology

Disciplines
Cognitive Psychology | Other Psychology | Social Psychology
Interactive Journaling as a Positive Intervention: 
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MAPP 800: Capstone Project

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I have a long way to go before I’ve met all your expectations.
I miss your sardonic humor and your quirky video texts and your kindness and your advice.
Save a place for me at your table, my friend.
Preface

August 3, 1998 – I received my first journal as a present on my 12th birthday. I remember opening its floral hardcover and flipping through the crisp blank pages. Each line seemed to me an invitation to share my adventures, my dreams, my bad days and my best ones. It was the beginning of a lifelong love affair with journaling. I journaled faithfully every day for the next five years, then (mostly) regularly for all the years that have followed.

May 2017 – In the spring of 2017, I found myself searching for meaningful work not on a standard job board, but on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s National Registry of Evidence Based Programs and Practices (NREPP). Something about this government-backed clearinghouse of best practices in treatment called to me. I had been working as the director of product development at a small company that developed curriculum for underserved youth, and despite hitting my growth ceiling there, I desperately wanted to continue to engage in work that made a difference in the world. I had a hunch that the next chapter of my life would not be found in a resume database, but here – in this lengthy index of important and impactful contributions.

My hunch was correct. I scrolled to the letter “I” and stopped at Interactive Journaling. Listed as a “promising practice” based on existing peer-reviewed research, the term instantly resonated with me. As I read about the practice – a structured journaling approach that aimed to move people through target behavior changes – I felt home. It combined my lifelong love of journaling with my deep desire to contribute to society in some meaningful way. The practice was developed by The Change Companies, a small organization in Carson City, Nevada. I reached out to them immediately.
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August 2017 – By the summer of 2017, I had started my new chapter. I moved my young family to Northern Nevada and joined a team of like-minded people committed to putting powerful tools for change directly into the hands of the people who needed them most. This process felt natural to me – a stimulating convergence of my personal and professional loves.

December 2019 – In 2019, I visited a female federal prison camp and spent the day with the women on the Residential Drug Abuse Program (RDAP) unit. In this nine-month program, the women, part of what’s called a “modified therapeutic community,” spend most of their waking hours together – engaging in small group therapy, community meetings, and other activities meant to promote recovery and a healthy lifestyle. Interactive Journals are an integral part of this program, with a new Journal disseminated every month. Program participants attend regular Journal groups in which key Journal topics and responses to Journal questions are discussed.

I was inspired by the enthusiasm I witnessed from these women – not only for the program itself, but for the role the Journals played in the women’s self-efficacy, personal growth, and movement toward their goals. One woman pulled me aside and beamed as she opened to a Journal page that combined writing with intricate artwork that represented her strengths and future plans to lead a successful and productive life. Some women shared their delight about the colorful imagery used in the Journals. Others were able to recount in great detail the concepts and definitions they were learning from their Journal pages – topics about positive attitudes, thinking traps, or complex cognitive-behavioral skills. The visit renewed my conviction that I was participating in something special – something that worked.
June 2021 – Before writing this paper, I dug through an old trunk and blew the dust off a journal I kept in my college undergrad days. I opened it up and found myself staring into the soul of a person who is me and yet not me – the person I was at age 19. She told me about the iron-heavy grief of painful breakups and the airy lightness of first kisses; about memories of her grandmother the day she passed away; about difficult decisions she was working through as her life’s path revealed itself bit by bit; and about grand adventures and misadventures with the dearest kinds of friends. As the scribbled dates at the top of each page moved through seasons and years, these journal entries reflected back a person who was growing, changing, learning, and processing. I felt proud of who she was becoming and honored to have lived her pages firsthand. It occurred to me that not only was her growth recorded in this journal, but that the journal itself, like a calm and consistent friend, played an important role in facilitating it.

August 2021 – It seems strange, I realize, to be writing about a paper-based practice in a digital age. In a world where there is an app for everything, is there room for a practice where artificial intelligence has no place? I believe so.

This paper is born of the conviction that the practice of Interactive Journaling works, that it can continue to bring light to dark places, and that it can facilitate well-being as much as it can recovery.
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Introduction

“The future task of positive psychology is to understand the factors that build strengths, outline the contexts of resilience, ascertain the role of positive experiences, and delineate the functions of positive relationships with others… Ultimately, positive psychology needs to develop effective interventions to increase and sustain these processes.” - Gable & Haidt, 2005 (p. 108)

A primary goal of positive psychology is to better understand the parts of the human experience that lead to flourishing – and find ways to foster more of these processes in individuals and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005). The intentional activities that strive to help individuals flourish are known as positive interventions, and there are several criteria that distinguish these activities from self-help and other therapeutic practices.

In their introduction to The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Positive Psychological Interventions, Parks & Schueller (2014) extend an invitation to practitioners:

We hope this volume will guide development in the coming decades of work on positive psychological interventions… Furthermore, developers of positive psychological interventions could adopt a more principle-focused approach to developing interventions based on theoretical models (pp. 22-23).

This paper comes in response to this invitation. Interactive Journaling is a structured, self-directed writing process designed to motivate and guide individuals toward positive change and greater well-being in target life areas (The Change Companies, 2021). Developed 30 years ago as a client-centered approach to substance use treatment, the practice of Interactive Journaling is firmly constructed on empirical foundations – including expressive writing, motivational interviewing, and cognitive-behavioral approaches.
While research on Interactive Journaling is limited, empirical studies, qualitative findings, and anecdotal reports indicate that this practice may have a great deal to contribute to the important work of enhancing well-being across populations. The focus here is to explore how the theoretical underpinnings and established structure of Interactive Journals may make the practice a candidate for adoption into the growing family of positive interventions. This paper will also examine how existing positive interventions – particularly those that use writing as a mechanism for achieving target outcomes – might be enhanced by incorporating them into Interactive Journals.

The practice of Interactive Journaling is a promising one for rehabilitative populations in the fields of justice services, addiction treatment, and impaired driving. This paper invites practitioners and researchers to broaden the lens of this practice to include other populations and new target outcomes – particularly those aimed at enhancing well-being and flourishing.

**What is Positive Psychology?**

“What is good about life is as genuine as what is bad and therefore deserves equal attention from psychologists.” -Christopher Peterson (2006, p. 4)

Traditional psychology is often defined in terms of deficits and pathologies. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), a taxonomy and diagnostic guide for mental health challenges, is considered the gold standard in mental health practice today (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This model serves a valuable purpose – its systematic categorization of mental illnesses has generated more effective treatment approaches and reliable research on mental health disorders (though it is argued that the DSM has not yet met its goal to improve clinical diagnoses) (Aboraya, 2007).
But human nature goes beyond taxonomy and deficits. Individuals, organizations, and societies also care deeply about strengthening relationships, deriving pleasure from positive moments, finding meaning and fulfillment in life, persevering through hardship, and living according to values. These traits comprise our subjective well-being – defined as a combination of life satisfaction, positive affect, and happiness (Diener et al., 2009) and eudaimonic well-being – defined as a life of meaning, community, autonomy, and self-actualization (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In short, we humans care about the things that make life worth living. This understanding is the foundation on which the field of positive psychology is constructed (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Positive psychology is defined as the “study of conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104). It acknowledges that psychology should be about more than finding ways to alleviate suffering – that to be whole and complete as a field, it should also empirically examine salutogenic models (Peterson & Park, 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). One conceptual framework of positive psychology divides it into three related domains: positive subjective experiences like happiness and pleasure (known as the “pleasant life”), positive individual traits like values and character strengths (the “engaged life”), and positive institutions and communities (“the meaningful life”) (Duckworth et al., 2005; Peterson & Park, 2003). Taken together, these topics have the potential to lead individuals to the acquisition of more strengths and positive traits, thereby facilitating more positive experiences (Peterson & Park, 2003).

It should be acknowledged that before positive psychology was popularized as a term by Martin Seligman (Seligman, 1998), other modern scholars had already begun the study of human flourishing across a wide array of topics. The ideas of Abraham Maslow (1968), Carl Rogers
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(1963), and other humanist psychologists underpin the philosophies of positive psychology – ideas about the value of goals, the importance of striving for one’s potential, and the significance of the individual (Urban, 1983). Notably, scholars like Kaufman (2018) have connected these early humanist ideologies with contemporary research on well-being, demonstrating their associations with enhanced relationships, mastery, purpose, and relationships. Additionally, studies of hope, optimism, flow, wisdom, and values were well underway prior to the emergence of the field (Peterson & Park, 2003). One valuable role of positive psychology, then, is to not only bring these ideas into the mainstream, but to create an umbrella for them – grouping formerly isolated bodies of research into a shared space (Peterson & Park, 2003). This function fosters richer, broader conversations on what makes life worth living, and creates a space in which the evidence-based application of these ideas is possible across a wide range of populations. As this paper will further explore, interventions that foster well-being, known as positive interventions, are a keystone of this application.

Positive Interventions

“Striving to be happy is a serious, legitimate, and worthy aim. If you consult the ancient texts in history, literature, or philosophy, you’ll also find that it’s eternal.”
-Sonja Lyubomirsky (2007, p. 2)

As humans, we are innately happiness-driven. We seek to flourish as an end unto itself, but may find that external stressors, negative self-talk, and genetic predispositions get in the way of this aim. Positive psychology demonstrates that these barriers can be overcome, paving a path for greater subjective and eudaimonic well-being. Our external stressors can be mitigated by internal calm (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014); our negative self-talk can be disputed with more
helpful thoughts and beliefs (Seligman, 2006), and genes, it would appear, play a lesser role in our overall happiness than previously thought, particularly when factored against the conscious actions we take toward a life of flourishing (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). These insights all speak to the fact that we are in control of our happiness, and that certain activities can improve our opportunities for flourishing.

The practices and intentional activities that put us on the path to greater subjective and eudaimonic well-being are called positive interventions. Also known as positive psychological interventions (Parks & Schueller, 2014), positive psychology exercises (Huffman et al., 2014), and positive activities (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013), such interventions are defined as “treatment methods or intentional activities aimed at cultivating positive feelings, positive behaviors, or positive cognitions” (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; p. 467). Importantly, while these practices often alleviate depression and other mental health factors, their primary aim is to enhance well-being (Vella-Brodrick, 2014).

The concept of interventions that promote well-being, like other frameworks within positive psychology, was conceived of prior to the formal emergence of the field. After studying the traits of happy people, Fordyce (1977, 1983) developed a series of happiness-increasing activities and assigned them to his students. He observed that students in his intervention group experienced lower rates of depression and anxiety and higher rates of happiness compared to control groups. This work laid the foundation for deeper empirical examinations into the activities that produce positive emotions and healthy outcomes.

What criteria separate positive interventions from other psychological interventions? An obvious yet important criterion is a goal to help individuals increase their well-being. This criterion distinguishes positive interventions from other therapeutic activities found in the
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psychology field at large (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). There are several pathways in which the promotion of well-being may take place: interventions may move individuals toward increased gratitude, greater social connection, forgiveness, more mindfulness and savoring, increased empathy, or the development of strengths (Parks & Schueller, 2014). Research has shown that the most widely known positive interventions elicit positive emotion, an effect that can lead to the growth of personal resources (Fredrickson, 2004; Gander et al., 2013).

Secondly, to be defined as a positive intervention, such activities must be evidence-based, which distinguishes them from “self-help” practices and increases the likelihood that they will achieve their aims across populations (Bolier et al., 2013). As in most scientific frameworks, however, new interventions must start somewhere, therefore at a minimum it is expected that interventions will fit within an existing empirically tested theoretical framework or use constitutive elements of interventions that are evidence-based (Pawelski, 2020). This framework could incorporate theories on how positive emotions are created and sustained – as in Fredrickson’s (2004) broaden and build theory or Seligman’s (2006) ABCDE model.

Thirdly, positive interventions are intentional and agentic. Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) argue that intentional behavioral, cognitive, or volitional activities are most likely to provide sustainable increases in happiness. This means that while some events may be “stumbled upon” that increase our happiness and well-being (like finding a $20 bill in the street, for example), they are not positive interventions because they are without volition and intentionality (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014).

Positive Interventions: Best Practices

Other “best practices” for operationalizing positive interventions have also been considered and explored. Schueller (2014) and Lyubomirsky and Layous (2013) have described
the importance of person-activity fit – leveraging a person’s strengths and weaknesses appropriately within the context of the intervention’s target change. Personality, motivation, and culture are other considerations that must be taken into account, such as introversion/extraversion, optimism levels, self-compassion, and connectedness with others (Schueller, 2014). Research has suggested that each of these factors can play a role in an intervention’s efficacy. Motivation is another consideration: research indicates that an intervention will be more effective when it aligns with a person’s interests and values (Schueller, 2014). Ethnicity and culture must also be considered: there may be some interventions that are entirely irrelevant for specific cultural groups, while others may be modified to make them more culturally appropriate (Schueller, 2014). These considerations can help practitioners craft highly individualized interventions, thereby increasing their efficacy and potential for well-being enhancement.

Pawelski (2020) offers another novel approach for tailoring interventions to the specific needs of individuals. As a general rule, positive interventions have been conceived as entire units that must be completed in a specific fashion in order to be effective. In fact, these units comprise constituent elements, which can be deconstructed and “mixed and matched” according to individual need. The analogy used for these two approaches is one of footie pajamas – which offer a complete, uniform wardrobe that covers a person from head to toe – versus a closet full of individual clothing items that can be changed out for different purposes (Pawelski, 2020).

When analyzing an intervention, researchers often begin with the activity, but when synthesizing interventions to meet individual needs, the activity becomes the final step, and we begin with the desired outcome (e.g., an improved relationship). From here, we examine the target system or domain in which a change will occur (e.g., relationships), the change being
targeted within the domain (e.g., improved listening skills), and the active ingredient that will cause the change (e.g., mindful awareness). Finally, this synthesis helps provide us with an appropriate activity. The Elements Model enables interventions to be fitted to individual needs and motivations, making them more effective than off-the-shelf activities (Pawelski, 2020). Research has demonstrated the powerful impact of the menu of “off-the-shelf” positive interventions already available. However, this impact is magnified when interventions are designed with individual considerations in mind – considerations like intrinsic goals and desired outcomes, race/ethnicity, gender, social class, ability level, sexual orientation, personality, and individual strengths and weaknesses (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013; Schueller, 2014). It is therefore imperative for researchers and practitioners to continue to develop intervention models that optimize person-activity fit and tailor activities to the individual.

Additional research has suggested that the most effective positive interventions are delivered as part of individual therapy (Bolier et al., 2013; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), with interventions lasting longer than four weeks but less than 12 (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Finally, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) recommend that practitioners continually find new activities, or novel ways to do the same activities, in order to sustainably increase well-being.

It is worth noting that some activities appear to be particularly effective at promoting well-being in the long term. Interventions that facilitate the performance of acts of kindness, the nurturing of relationships, the pursuit of intrinsic goals, and social engagement have been shown to enhance long-term efficacy (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005), and individuals who enjoy an activity are more likely to sustain it over time (Schueller, 2010).
Examples of Positive Interventions

Over 100 positive interventions have been suggested (Duckworth et al., 2005), with at least 51 that have been studied empirically (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). The rest of this section will describe five widely researched interventions:

- Three good things
- Using signature strengths in a new way
- The gratitude visit
- One door closes, another door opens
- Savoring

The three good things exercise involves writing down three things that went well at the end of each day, along with an explanation for why these things happened (Gander et al., 2013; Seligman, 2005). In an experiment in which participants completed this exercise for one week, Gander et al. (2013) found that happiness increased immediately after this intervention and was sustained one month after completion. Notably, individuals who continued practicing on their own after the assigned one-week period benefitted the most. In an earlier experiment, benefits were observed by Seligman et al. (2005) one month following the posttest. These benefits – which included increased happiness and reduced depression – were sustained at three-month and six-month follow-ups.

The intervention of using one’s signature strengths in a new way – involving learning one’s top character strengths (see Peterson et al., 2004) and finding ways to use one of these strengths every day for a week – showed similar improvements to the three good things exercise across multiple studies. Seligman et al. (2005) found that at the one-, three-, and six-month posttests, participants had increased their baseline happiness and decreased their baseline
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depression. Like in the three good things intervention, participants who continued this practice independently after the one-week instruction showed the most significant effect, indicating that habit development is important for sustaining gains. Gander et al. (2013) were able to replicate these findings. After three months, participants in this intervention group had reduced depressive symptoms compared to the placebo control group at a rate that approached significance. Six months later, their happiness levels remained higher than the control group.

The gratitude visit is a third intervention that has been widely researched. This intervention involves the participant writing a letter of gratitude to someone who has helped them in some way but whom they have never properly thanked. Participants are then instructed to personally deliver the letter and read it out loud to the recipient (Gander et al., 2013; Seligman et al., 2005). Both Gander et al. (2013) and Seligman et al. (2005) found that compared to the placebo control, participants in the gratitude visit group experienced significant increases in happiness and alleviation of depression symptoms at the one-month follow-up. Unlike the three good things and using signature strengths exercises, however, these large effects were not sustained at the three-month follow-up. Seligman et al. (2005) suggest that this may be because the gratitude visit is not easily incorporated into a person’s daily routine and is therefore unlikely to be repeated on a regular basis. It makes sense, then, for practitioners to intersperse interventions like the gratitude visit with those that are easier to complete more regularly (Seligman et al., 2005).

The intervention known as one door closes, another door opens promotes gratitude in the face of adversity. Participants are instructed to write about a challenging event in their lives, then describe how the event led to an unexpected positive outcome (Gander et al., 2013). In some cases, individuals describe three separate adverse events and the important doors that opened as a
result (Rashid & Anjum, 2008; Seligman et al., 2006). The goal of this intervention is to allow individuals to emphasize the positive that exist in their lives, zooming out from the negative alone. In one study, participants who engaged in this intervention for one week showed reduced depressive symptoms at immediate posttest and again at one, three, and six-month follow-ups (Gander et al., 2013).

A final example is a daily savoring exercise. Savoring is defined as the mindful enjoyment and appreciation of an event, accomplishment, beauty, or physical comfort as it is taking place (Rashid & Anjum, 2008; Seligman et al., 2006). In the field of positive psychotherapy (see Rashid & Seligman, 2008), participants are instructed to take time once a day to truly savor an activity they might usually rush through – taking a shower or walking to a destination, for example – then write their thoughts about how savoring the activity made it different from previous times they had completed it (Seligman et al., 2006). In another variation, participants are instructed to plan and carry out a pleasurable activity with the intent of savoring the experience (Rashid & Anjum, 2008). Research has demonstrated that savoring interventions like these – geared toward attuning individuals to positive experiences as they are happening – boost both the frequency and intensity of positive emotions (Bryant, 2003; Quoidbach et al., 2010). In a validation study of Bryant’s (2003) Savoring Beliefs Inventory, it was noted that savoring is also positively correlated with traits like optimism, self-control, and self-esteem, with negative correlations to traits like guilt, depression, and hopelessness.
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Expressive Writing

“Why does one write, if not to put one’s pieces together?” -Eduardo Galeano (1992, p. 121)

It is worth noting that four of the five positive interventions described above involve the act of writing. Indeed, researchers have identified at least 19 positive interventions that incorporate writing in some fashion (Parks & Schueller, 2014; Tarragona, 2019). The evidence-based practice of expressive writing, therefore, might be considered an underpinning of many positive interventions. This section will further define and explore this practice.

Expressive writing is an approach in which individuals write their deepest thoughts and feelings about a difficult event, exploring the experience itself alongside the thoughts and emotions surrounding it (Pennebaker & Chung, 2012; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). Standard expressive writing interventions invite participants to explore difficult or traumatic events connected to childhood, relationships, or connections of the event to the past, present, or future. Participants are instructed to not concern themselves with spelling, grammar, or punctuation, and instead focus on their deepest thoughts and feelings around the event they are describing.

Research has connected expressive writing to a number of positive physical and mental health outcomes. In terms of physical health, researchers have observed improved immune functioning (Esterling et al., 1994; Petrie et al., 1995; Smyth et al., 2011), reduced symptoms of asthma and arthritis (Smyth et al., 2011, Smyth et al., 1999), improved sleep (Smyth et al., 2011), and improved cardiovascular functioning (McGuire et al., 2005). Across multiple studies, researchers have observed significant decreases in physician visits in the months following the expressive writing intervention (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Pennebaker & Chung, 2012).

The effects of expressive writing on mental and emotional well-being are equally compelling. Research has demonstrated a reduction in self-reported depression (Smyth et al.,
2011, Kacewicz et al., 2007), improved life satisfaction and subjective well-being (King, 2001; Pennebaker & Chung, 2012; Schutte et al., 2012), enhanced creativity (Pennebaker & Chung, 2012), reduced traumatic distress (Smyth, 1998), increased meaning (Schutte et al., 2012), decreased autonomic arousal, and increased emotional self-regulation (Davidson et al., 2002).

An important question that has been posed by researchers is *why* writing interventions are so effective in producing these results. A number of theories have been posited: it may facilitate healthy emotional expression, labeling, and processing; it may enable the positive narrative construction of events, thus facilitating greater understanding, meaning-making, and perspective-taking; and it may help us stand back and look at the events of our lives in a way that enables healthy changes and a positive sense of identity (Pennebaker & Chung, 2012). It appears there may be multiple underlying mechanisms by which expressive writing impacts well-being.

**Positive Expressive Writing Paradigms**

Notably, participants often report short-term distress directly following traditional expressive writing practices (King, 2001; Lepore et al., 2002). One wonders, then, whether the mechanisms and benefits described above could be achieved without writing about difficult or traumatic events in one’s life. This question, initially posed by King and Miner (2000), has led to a robust body of research on the value of positive writing interventions. The work of Fredrickson (2004) has demonstrated the value of positive emotions in buffering against stressors by helping them build personal and social resources. It makes sense, then, that using writing as a prime for positive emotions might lead to desirable outcomes.

Positive writing interventions have included writing about intensely positive experiences (Burton & King, 2004) and describing one’s best possible future self (King, 2001). In the
intensely positive experience intervention, participants were given the following instructions for three consecutive days:

Think of the most wonderful experience or experiences in your life, happiest moments, ecstatic moments, moments of rapture, perhaps from being in love, or from listening to music, of suddenly “being hit” by a book or painting or from some great creative moment. Choose one such experience or moment. Try to imagine yourself at that moment, including all the feelings and emotions associated with the experience. Now write about the experience in as much detail as possible, trying to include the feelings, thoughts, and emotions that were present at the time. Please try your best to re-experience the emotions involved (Burton & King, 2004, p. 155).

The group that completed this prompt experienced significant increases in positive affect following the intervention, while the control group, which was instructed to write about a neutral topic, did not see a significant increase in positive affect. Following the study, intervention participants experienced a decrease in physician visits (Burton & King, 2004). The similar physical health benefits between writing about distressing or traumatic events and writing about positive experiences suggests the mechanisms and benefits are similar between these writing practices.

King (2001; 2002) conjectured that an important function of traditional expressive writing exercises may be their ability to promote self-regulatory processes – a function that does not require reliving past traumas or describing intensely negative emotions. To test this theory, King (2001) developed the best possible self exercise, in which participants respond to the following prompt for four consecutive days:
Think about your life in the future. Imagine that everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your life goals. Think of this as the realization of all your life dreams. Now, write about what you imagined (King, 2001, p. 801).

There were three other groups in this study: one that responded to a prompt to write about a traumatic past event, one that spent two days writing about a traumatic past event and two days writing about best possible self, and a group that responded to a neutral topic for four days. Participants who responded to the best possible self prompt alone experienced a significant increase in positive mood and higher psychological well-being than control groups. Along with the trauma-only writing group, this group had significantly fewer physician visits at follow-up (King, 2001).

King’s work on intensely positive experiences (Burton & King, 2004) and best possible future selves (King, 2001) indicates that the expressive writing paradigm has much to contribute to positive interventions. Not only does this decades-old approach alleviate depression, it has enhanced well-being and improved mental and physical health across a large number of studies and populations (Pennebaker & Chung, 2012; Sexton & Pennebaker, 2009).

**Interactive Journaling**

“*Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.*” -William Wordsworth

Expressive writing practices demonstrate the value of getting one’s thoughts, feelings, and meaningful experiences down on paper. One modality that has been strongly informed by the science of expressive writing is Interactive Journaling.
Interactive Journaling, a tradmarked practice of The Change Companies, is a structured and experiential writing process that motivates and guides individuals toward positive life change. While Interactive Journaling is, in many cases, a complete system – consisting of a facilitator guide, pre-post assessments, and a structured group programming environment – it also functions as a stand-alone intervention that a person can engage with individually (The Change Companies, 2021).

Currently, Interactive Journaling is widely used in addiction and mental health treatment, correctional settings, impaired driving courses, and other settings that might be considered “remedial” or “rehabilitative.” However, the practice and its constituent approaches could be widely disseminated in any population that might engage with positive psychology as a framework for change: corporate, educational, or advocacy, for example.

Interactive Journals engage participants by incorporating several consistent elements on each page: bite-sized copy about a specific skill or topic area, a full-color graphic illustrating this skill or topic, and a nonconfrontational question intended to help the participant think and write about the application of this topic in their own life (The Change Companies, 2021). For example, a page in a Journal about evidence-based processes of change (see Norcross et al., 2011; Prochaska & Prochaska, 2016) might include copy describing research on people’s ability to make difficult, long-term life changes. The questions on the page would allow the reader to reflect on how this holds true for them. For example, “Describe a time you were successful at making a change,” “What did you do in order to be successful?” and “Describe your level of confidence in your ability to make other positive changes in your life.” Finally, the graphic on the page might feature a road or a pathway, illustrating the concept of change as an ongoing journey.
Interactive Journaling as a Positive Intervention

Figure 1

An example of an Interactive Journal page

Note. Interactive Journaling is meant to engage participants using several consistent elements on each page. Used with permission from The Change Companies.

Distinctions From Other Writing Practices

As the example above demonstrates, the practice of Interactive Journaling differs significantly from standard journaling practices in which a person records their thoughts and feelings freely in a notebook or diary. Rather, the structured format of Interactive Journals allows for the provision of relevant information and reflective questions on each page, guiding participants toward insights in the target need area.
Another comparison one might make is between Journals and other forms of psychoeducational literature. Indeed, texts like self-help books, manuals, and informational pamphlets can be helpful for individuals seeking growth, well-being enhancement, or positive change (Apodaca & Miller, 2003; Jack & Ronan, 2008). However, Interactive Journaling differs from passive reading in that it invites the reader to actively engage with the text through the guided journaling exercises, allowing them to personalize the content to their own goals and lived experiences.

If Interactive Journaling is more structured than open journaling and more active and personalized than reading psychoeducational texts, what distinguishes it from traditional expressive writing practices? After all, expressive writing provides directive prompts and is active and personal in the sense that participants can go as deep in their responses as they wish. One might argue that Interactive Journaling is simply building on this paradigm: in addition to incorporating the structured, personalized, and action-oriented qualities of expressive writing, Interactive Journaling uses full-color graphics and balanced layout designs to increase engagement and retention (see Armbruster et al., 1991; Bicen & Beheshti, 2017; Reis et al., 2005; Wichmann et al., 2002), provides a sense of permanence by using a saddle-stitched booklet style and high-quality paper, and builds in a greater amount of education and skill-building than the practice of expressive writing alone. Additionally, because Interactive Journals go directly into the hands of the participant, there is flexibility in terms of where and when each exercise might be completed. Finally, the formatting of Interactive Journals makes this practice a prime candidate for the user-friendly delivery of evidence-based therapies and psychological interventions.
Functions and Benefits of Workbooks

The functions and benefits of Interactive Journaling are similar to those described by L’Abate & Kern (2002) when referring to the potential advantages of workbooks generally. One of these benefits is related to structure (L’Abate, 2004; L’Abate & Kern, 2002). As described earlier in this paper, the structure of Interactive Journals means that even if a coach, therapist, or other practitioner has not been trained in a specific modality or need area, they can administer an Interactive Journal that addresses it efficaciously. Secondly, Interactive Journals allow individuals to increase self-awareness and commitments to change at their own pace. They can teach vital well-being skills and coping mechanisms without necessitating the presence of a professional (L’Abate & Kern, 2002).

Another noted advantage is specificity (L’Abate & Kern, 2002; L’Abate, 2004). Interactive Journals deal with one specific condition or need area. The permanent messaging and directives of printed Journals may offer greater clarity to participants, as opposed to relying on listening to, understanding, and integrating a practitioner’s advice in the moment. Similarly, Interactive Journals can disseminate evidence-based practices more quickly and broadly than practitioners alone may be able to (L’Abate & Kern, 2002). Interactive Journals are also versatile, meaning they can be utilized as part of structured treatment, self-directed, or as a follow-up to therapy or coaching (L’Abate, 2004; L’Abate & Kern, 2002).

As with any psychological intervention, there are also possible disadvantages. L’Abate and Kern (2002) point out that writing in a workbook may lead to individuals uncovering past traumas before they are ready, and there is also the risk that the recommended workbook will not be a good fit for an individual’s specific needs. However, these risks are inherent across a range of self-help, personal development, and therapeutic activities (see Parloff, 1976).
L’Abate (2004) argues that “workbooks are to psychological interventions what medications are to psychiatric interventions” (p. 6). Like medication, more than one workbook may be administered to treat a single condition, and if one doesn’t work, perhaps another one (or a different dosage) will. One key difference, L’Abate acknowledges, is that once a workbook has been administered and completed, it cannot be “taken” repeatedly like medication. However, one might argue that the same workbook could be completed at different times throughout a person’s life, taking on different meaning based on the person’s growth and stage of life.

**Interactive Journaling vs. Workbooks: Primary Distinctions**

In describing workbooks as an intervention tool, we draw closer to finding a matching paradigm to the practice of Interactive Journaling. Yet there remain distinctions between broadly defined psychological workbooks and the standards and norms that define Interactive Journaling.

The first of these standards is the incorporation of motivational interviewing strategies (see Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Motivational interviewing is a way of communicating (verbally or through written prompts) that elicits an individual’s own motivation to change by encouraging the use of “change talk” regarding a target behavior. Change talk is often defined as language that expresses a person’s desire, ability, reason or need to change (the acronym DARN) (Moyers et al., 2009). Change talk can be elicited using questions like, “What are three reasons making this change is important to you?” or “Based on what you know about yourself and your abilities, what might you do to be successful at this?” (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). While motivational interviewing is traditionally used in clinical, face-to-face settings, Interactive Journaling also encourages “change talk” – though in a written medium – by posing reflective questions on each page that draw on the strategic evocation of change talk that is consistent with the practice of motivational interviewing.
Another therapeutic modality frequently incorporated into Interactive Journals is that of cognitive-behavioral therapy. Cognitive-behavioral therapy strives to increase a person’s awareness of their own cognitive distortions and teach them how to investigate, reappraise and challenge inaccurate and unhelpful biases (Beck & Dozois, 2011). In some cases, cognitive-behavioral skill-building is the primary focus of an entire Interactive Journal, as in the Rational Self-Counseling Journal developed for the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Residential Drug Abuse Program (The Change Companies, 2018b). In this Journal, participants learn the ABC model adapted from Ellis & Ellis (2011), wherein a person experiences an Activating Event, has a Belief or cognition about the event, and that cognition results in a Consequence involving feelings, behaviors, and outcomes. Participants learn evidence-based skills for increasing their rational thinking and effectively challenging inaccurate thinking patterns.
Note. The Rational Self-Counseling Journal, shown here, teaches a comprehensive cognitive-behavioral approach that includes the ABC model adapted from Ellis & Ellis (2011). Used with permission from The Change Companies.

In other cases, Interactive Journals will address another topic and use cognitive-behavioral skills to enhance participants’ competency in the target area. For example, an Interactive Journal on improving relationships in the workplace might help participants challenge unhelpful thought patterns about their workplace relationships, such as, “I don’t belong at a company with this many smart people,” or “I can’t stand working next to this person for another day.”

Whether exploring cognitive-behavioral therapy at a more comprehensive level or simply helping participants recognize how their thoughts may be affecting their outcomes, most
Interactive Journals utilize a cognitive-behavioral approach to some extent, guiding individuals toward more helpful and accurate thinking patterns.

Each page in an Interactive Journal generally draws on the same three consistent elements: bite-sized copy that educates participants on the topic being presented (often designed to be consumed in 30 seconds or less), a graphic component (this may include illustrative photography or an educative infographic to reinforce written content), and questions to help the participant reflect on and apply what they have learned to their own goals and lived experiences. Other page elements may include a first-person quote representing the target audience, “Keep in Mind” boxes to emphasize salient points on the page, drawing exercises, or checkboxes that allow participants to select a response from a menu of options (selecting your top values from a list of common values, for example).
Interactive Journaling as a Positive Intervention

Figure 3
The Elements of an Interactive Journal

Note. Interactive Journal pages draw on three consistent elements: bite-sized copy, a graphic component (illustrative photography or an educative infographic) and questions to help participants reflect and apply what they have learned. First-person quotes, “Keep in Mind” boxes, drawing exercises, and checkboxes are also common. Used with permission from The Change Companies.

As previously described, Interactive Journals are also unique in the sense that they are always bound in high-quality, full-color booklets, differentiating them from workbook PDFs that can be printed from the internet or loose-leaf sheets compiled into a binder. A number of individuals who have participated in Interactive Journaling have expressed the value of having a permanent, lasting resource in which to record their personal journeys of change. In an anonymous survey of self-reported feedback from 27,066 Interactive Journaling participants in
Interactive Journaling as a Positive Intervention

Alaska, Kentucky, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin, 84 percent of respondents said they planned to keep their Journals after completing the formal courses in which they were administered (The Change Companies, n.d.-a). A separate survey was administered to 257 beneficiaries of The Salvation Army who completed Interactive Journals specifically designed for The Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Centers. 92% described their Journals as helpful for their rehabilitation (The Change Companies, n.d.-b). Comments from respondents included the following:

- “What I like about my Journal is I can find out more about myself than I’ve ever known before. Thank you for helping me find myself.”
- “If you really take this information seriously, I promise you, you will change… I believe that this material gave me insight.”
- “I feel as though it’s like having my own personal counselor.”
- “I can look back on what I wrote and change it because that shows me I’m growing and that’s good.”
- “Not only has it helped me get to where I am, but so far my whole life story is between the covers. No one, at least not me, can dispute anything that is between the covers. If you cannot ask… for help, the journal will get you started” (The Change Companies, n.d.-b, pp. 11-13).

Research on Interactive Journaling

Based on Journal sales since 1988, Interactive Journals have been administered to over 25 million individuals in the last three decades (The Change Companies, 2021). Despite this impressive dissemination, research on the practice has been limited. Studies that do exist have mostly been conducted in correctional, impaired driving, and addiction treatment settings, though
the insights they raise may have broader relevance. A few of these studies are summarized below.

One experimental trial was conducted with 183 male inmates in a North Carolina jail. The study included individuals who had been previously incarcerated in the last year, who were arrested for an alcohol- or drug-related offense, and who met DSM-IV criteria for substance dependence (Proctor et al., 2012). Participants in the experimental condition received one Interactive Journal, *Changing Course* (The Change Companies, 2008), which describes stages and processes of change (see Norcross et al., 2011; Prochaska & Prochaska, 2016), helps participants weigh the costs and benefits of making positive life change, and guides participants through the development of a plan for next steps they wish to take. The control group received a government-issued brochure containing information on substance use. Importantly, completing the Journal was not compulsory, and no additional programming accompanied Journal/brochure dissemination. Twelve months after Journals were disseminated, researchers noted recidivism rates were 15% lower for the experimental group compared to the control group (51% for the journaling group and 66% for the control group) – a statistically significant difference. Notably, independent predictors of re-arrest were severity of posttraumatic stress disorder, group assignment (Interactive Journaling group vs. control group), and employment status (Proctor et al., 2012). Future research may shed light on whether Interactive Journaling correlates with motivation to secure employment or improve a person’s mental health functioning.

Another noteworthy experiment was conducted with 150 women in drug court programs (Messina et al., 2012). In the experimental group, an Interactive Journal designed specifically for women, *Women in Recovery* (Covington & The Change Companies, 2002), was administered alongside an 11-session trauma treatment program. The control group received “treatment as
usual” in a local outpatient facility. Researchers saw a significant decrease in PTSD symptoms and better treatment performance in women in the experimental group compared to the control group at 21-month follow-up. Women in the experimental group were also more likely to complete treatment and less likely to receive sanctions or disciplinary action during treatment (Messina et al., 2012). An obvious limitation of this study was not being able to identify Interactive Journaling’s contribution to these outcomes. Other treatment elements like group therapy, participants’ therapeutic relationship with the facilitator, and the program’s trauma-informed approach likely also played a role in participant success. However, when we consider the ways in which Interactive Journals reinforce program content and allow for deeper personal application, it is possible that they helped extend the impact of therapy and enhanced retention and application outside of the group environment. Future research may help us better understand this function of Interactive Journaling.

A third study was conducted with 872 DUI and DWI offenders in the state of Oklahoma, who were asked to complete an Interactive Journal with content specific to impaired driving behaviors (Scheck et al., 2013). A pre-post test measuring program knowledge showed significant improvement after completing the course. A second questionnaire examined the subjective value participants placed on the Interactive Journals. 94.7% of participants said the program would help them change their drinking behaviors. 88.4% intended to keep their Journals following completion of the course. 80.2% of respondents reported sharing the information from their Journal with others or intending to do so in the future (Scheck et al., 2013). Importantly, participants reported that the most useful components of the Journal were not the parts that communicated impaired driving information, but the pages that allowed them to develop plans for change and set goals for the future (Scheck et al., 2013).
Because of the paucity of existing published research on Interactive Journaling, it is worth mentioning one additional study conducted as doctoral research by Mitchell Jay Moore (2011). Moore’s research focused on the post-release outcomes of 195 inmates from a low-security federal correctional institution who participated in the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Residential Drug Abuse Program (RDAP). The nine-month program is for inmates with a documented history of substance use who meet the criteria for a substance use disorder. The program involves small group therapy, one-to-one meetings with prison treatment staff, and Journal groups specially designed to process the content of the Interactive Journals disseminated to participants each month. These Journals have been customized in partnership with the Bureau of Prisons to align with the content and objectives of RDAP. Moore compared the post-release status of individuals who completed RDAP with those who dropped out partway through the program. At 48 months post-release, it was observed that RDAP completers were two times less likely to engage in criminal activity than non-completers, four times less likely to engage in substance use, and 10 times more likely to gain employment and housing stability. As a result, RDAP completers were three times less likely to have their supervision revoked than those who did not complete the program (Moore, 2011).

Like other studies that feature Interactive Journaling, the practice is one of many interventions that likely contributed to these outcomes. The program’s community approach, small therapy groups, and other processes likely had an impact on post-release outcomes. However, it is worth noting that the language of the Journals becomes the language of the program – used in community meetings, process groups, and other programmatic settings. It is possible, then, that the Journals help reinforce treatment-oriented language in addition to helping personalize the program to participants’ individual treatment goals.
These studies are suggestive of a number of positive effects of Interactive Journaling, including increased self-regulation (demonstrated in reduced recidivism and improved treatment outcomes), enhanced self-efficacy (demonstrated in a belief in the possibility of change), and increased motivation to make positive life changes (as evidenced by a number of results across these studies). It is possible that these outcomes connect back to the constitutive elements of Interactive Journaling: an emphasis on eliciting change talk through evocative questions inspired by motivational interviewing, the utilization of a cognitive-behavioral approach in each Journal, and bite-sized, evidence-based psychoeducation that is reinforced using colorful and engaging core graphics on each page.

Is Interactive Journaling a Positive Intervention?

“One of the most pervasive and promising elements of positive interventions is narrative.”
-Tomasulo & Pawelski (2012; p. 1189)

We now arrive at the core objective of this paper: to examine the ways in which the practice of Interactive Journaling might be considered a positive intervention. This section will connect the functions and elements of Interactive Journaling with the various functions of positive interventions described earlier in this paper: their aim to increase well-being (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014), their basis on empirically tested frameworks (Bolier et al., 2013; Pawelski, 2020), and the importance of volition and intentionality for long-term sustainability (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). The “best practices” of positive interventions previously described will also be mapped to Interactive Journaling. Person-activity fit will be discussed (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013; Schueller, 2014), including instances in which Interactive Journaling might not
be an appropriate fit. Other best practices such as novelty (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005) and the facilitation of kindness, positive relationships, goal achievement, and social engagement (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005) will also be explored. Finally, this section will examine whether Interactive Journals might enhance the efficacy of existing positive interventions, particularly those that already incorporate writing into the activity.

**Figure 4**

*Interactive Journaling in Positive Psychology*

![Diagram showing the relationship between Interactive Journaling and other positive interventions within the framework of positive psychology.]

*Note.* The figure above demonstrates where Interactive Journaling might fit within the framework of positive psychology.

**Interactive Journaling and Well-being**

Increasing gratitude, enabling social connection, promoting mindfulness or savoring, enhancing empathy, fostering forgiveness, and leveraging strengths – all of these are mechanisms by which positive interventions achieve their aim of increasing well-being (Parks & Schueller, 2014).
The structure of Interactive Journaling may promote any target change: information about and strategies for achieving the target change are incorporated into copy; reflective, motivational interviewing-style questions aim to promote self-efficacy in the target change; and additional exercises may be built in for putting the target change into action and tracking progress over time.

What might this look like in practice when the target change is enhanced well-being? Let us use the example of gratitude listed above. Known interventions that promote gratitude include the three good things exercise (Seligman, 2005), keeping a daily gratitude journal (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), writing a letter of gratitude (Lyubomirsky et al., 2008; Seligman, 2005), savoring (Bryant, 2003), and cognitive reframing (Beck & Dozois, 2011). An Interactive Journal about gratitude might include descriptions about each of these interventions, first-person quotes, reflective questions that draw people into the intervention, and information on the unique benefits of each gratitude activity. Appendix A of this paper provides a more concrete example of this concept.

A similar approach might be applied to other mechanisms that promote well-being: a mindfulness Journal, for example, might describe different mindfulness practices and their benefits, introduce ways participants may have already been mindful in the past, provide strategies for building and maintaining an ongoing mindfulness practice, and provide space to reflect on what is learned and track progress in a specific mindfulness goal.

**Interactive Journaling and Empirically Tested Frameworks**

Positive interventions must be evidence-based – or at least fit within existing empirically tested theoretical frameworks – in order to distinguish themselves from “self-help” activities and achieve their primary aim of promoting well-being. As has previously been described, Interactive
Journaling draws on three widely researched empirical frameworks: expressive writing, motivational interviewing, and cognitive-behavioral therapy. Additionally, an Interactive Journal may incorporate any number of evidence-based frameworks into its pages, insofar as these frameworks are in service of the target change and conducive to the pen-to-paper format of Interactive Journaling. Positive psychotherapy serves as one possible example of this. Defined as an approach that “attempts to counteract symptoms with strengths, weaknesses with virtues, and deficits with skills” (Rashid & Seligman, 2019, p. 1), positive psychotherapy has been shown to reduce depressive symptoms for at least six months in its participants (Seligman et al., 2006). Therapy sessions center around positive psychology topics, such as character strengths, forgiveness, gratitude, hope and optimism, posttraumatic growth, positive relationships, savoring, and meaning and purpose (Rashid & Seligman, 2018). While a workbook is currently available (see Rashid & Seligman, 2019), splitting each session into its own Interactive Journal might allow for increased engagement and application of the topics presented. Importantly, positive psychotherapy is easily packaged into the format of Interactive Journaling, making Interactive Journals an appropriate vehicle for the delivery of this form of therapy.

This example could be applied to any number of therapies – an Interactive Journal might be a helpful tool for reinforcing dialectical behavior therapy (Linehan et al., 2015), mindfulness frameworks, solution-focused therapy (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000), or other empirically tested modalities. From a nontherapeutic standpoint, a Journal might simply deliver evidence-based practices for living a healthier lifestyle, such as physical activity, healthy eating, developing positive relationships, or managing stress.
Interactive Journaling and Intentionality

Long-term happiness is best achieved if an activity is volitional – that is, in alignment with an individual’s own will and sense of agency (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Volition and intentionality are criteria of positive interventions described in this paper. While many of the populations currently served by Interactive Journaling might be considered “captive audiences” (e.g., correctional populations and individuals in inpatient treatment facilities), the testimonials listed earlier indicate that completion of a Journal may be accompanied by a sense of ownership and agency (one demonstration of this is in the statement, “I can look back on what I wrote and change it because that shows me I’m growing and that’s good”) (The Change Companies, n.d.-b, p. 11). Each opening page of an Interactive Journal contains an invitation similar to that of standard expressive writing practices (Pennebaker & Chung, 2012; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016): to not concern yourself with spelling, grammar, and punctuation, and to recognize that this practice is for you and you alone. The following example can be found in The Change Companies’ My Personal Health Journal (2018a):

The process of Interactive Journaling will serve you best when you are open and honest with your responses. Instead of worrying about neatness, handwriting, or spelling, focus on the accuracy and insight of your statements. Personalize the information to your own circumstances. Feel free to use any white space or margins to complete your thoughts. This is your Journal. Have fun with it. Begin to adjust your thoughts and actions to create your story of a healthier you (p. i).

The act of writing freely about one’s experiences in response to open and nonconfrontational questions is an inherently intentional and agentic process. This is true even if
the assignment to journal is externally imposed, and may be particularly agentic when the process is self-initiated.

**Interactive Journaling and Person-Activity Fit**

Person-activity fit means areas like personality, motivation, culture, and strengths are considered when an intervention is administered (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013; Schueller, 2014). Interactive Journaling may provide this fit for underserved populations and other groups for whom Journals are customized. A sense of ownership in the journaling process can also allow for an internal customization of sorts – making the practice and the Journal your own by engaging with it in your own way. Additionally, Pawelski’s (2020) elements model can help us determine for which target outcomes Interactive Journaling is the appropriate activity. Finally, it is important to emphasize that Interactive Journaling, like other modalities, is likely not a fit for every population and need.

**Interactive Journaling: A fit for underserved populations.**

L’Abate and Kern (2002) describe workbooks in general as being an excellent activity fit for underserved populations, such as “the home-bound and the handicapped, military personnel, Peace Corps volunteers, missionary families abroad, and incarcerated felons and juveniles” (p. 241). This observation is based on the likelihood that workbooks are more accessible and cost-effective than therapy for these groups, and can provide a vehicle for the dissemination of evidence-based tools to this population in a way that is clear and efficacious.

Interactive Journaling has found its way into many of these populations. When beneficiaries of The Salvation Army complete their first Interactive Journal, it is often the case that they were homeless before stepping into one of the organization’s Adult Rehabilitation Centers. During the COVID-19 lockdown, in-person programming was put on hold in
correctional facilities, making Interactive Journals a valuable solution for continuing to provide evidence-based activities and information. Even in the absence of a lockdown, this practice continues to benefit underserved individuals by putting the tools and resources for change directly into their hands.

**Customizability.**

Interactive Journals have been customized for a broad range of special populations and groups: Jewish youth, Native Americans, adolescent girls, veterans, women in treatment, children in foster care, and more (The Change Companies, 2021). Journals have also been customized to address a broad range of topics and needs: healthy relationships, life skills, emotional self-regulation, rational thinking, strategies for change, financial literacy, employment skills, physical health, and stress management, to name a few. These topics are often further customized into service areas, such as education, justice services, addiction treatment, mental and behavioral health, or impaired driving. Currently, over 250 off-the-shelf offerings are available to deliver these topics to these populations in these settings, with more being developed each year (The Change Companies, 2021).

**Making an Interactive Journal your own.**

While an Interactive Journal may look the same from person to person when initially disseminated, it becomes a personalized resource when the participant engages with it from the context of their own needs, goals, and life experiences. One might argue that this is true for all positive interventions – a group of people may receive the same basic instructions, but the engagement, motivations, backgrounds, and unique needs each individual brings to the performance of the activity make it something new entirely. The three good things you choose to reflect on at the end of each day, for example, would make the *three good things* exercise unique
to you – distinct from the *three good things* exercise practiced by someone else. The same might be argued for Interactive Journals, and evidenced in statements like, “…My whole life story is between the covers;” “What I like about my Journal is I can find out more about myself than I’ve ever known before;” and “I feel as though it’s like having my own personal counselor” (The Change Companies, n.d.-b, pp. 11-13).

**The elements model: A tool for identifying fit.**

Pawelski’s (2020) elements model enables interventions to be fitted to individual needs and motivations. Through this model, we see how Interactive Journaling could be the chosen activity for any number of desired outcomes, due to its ability to target different systems and changes based on the population being served. The constituent elements might look as follows for Interactive Journaling generally:

- Desired outcome: Progress in the target behavior change (e.g., greater self-compassion, increased self-regulation, or enhanced meaning)
- Target system: Cognition, Emotion
- Target change: Increased self-efficacy
- Active ingredient(s): Strategies for change → Personal insights and application → Future goals
- Activity: Interactive Journaling

More specifically, using the gratitude Journal proposed above as an example, this model might look as follows:

- Desired outcome: Enhanced positive emotions
- Target system(s): Cognitive, Emotional
- Target change: Gratitude
• Active ingredient(s): Noticing three good things a day → Writing → Personal insights on an abundant life → Gratitude increases

• Activity: Interactive Journaling

Because of the flexibility of Interactive Journaling as a practice, the target systems and changes could be traded out and still leave Interactive Journaling as a possible activity for meeting the desired outcome.

**For whom is Interactive Journaling not a fit?**

Like other therapeutic modalities, Interactive Journaling is not a panacea, and may not be suitable for every population. Certainly individuals with cognitive disabilities, dyslexia, or illiteracy may be challenged with the reading and writing aspect of the practice. Individuals with visual impairments would be hindered without an auditory aid to guide them through the exercises. According to Sexton and Pennebaker (2009), the practice of expressive writing has been less effective when studied among professional writers – particularly poets. It is possible that this holds true for Interactive Journaling, which draws heavily on the expressive writing paradigm.

While a number of therapeutic modalities are conducive to the pen-to-paper format of Interactive Journaling, there are others that would not translate as well into this framework. Prolonged exposure therapy (Foa et al., 2018), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR) (Palumbo et al., 2020), or equine-assisted therapy (Earles et al., 2015) are a few examples of practices that would be difficult to integrate into a Journal.

It is difficult to know without further research which cultures, ethnicities, language groups, or clinical populations would not be served by Interactive Journaling – or for whom the practice may even be culturally inappropriate or harmful. As L’Abate and Kern (2002) caution
regarding workbooks more broadly, few specific workbooks have been validated, therefore professionals are advised to use proper judgment when administering workbooks in clinical populations.

With these limitations in mind, it is worth returning to Pennebaker’s work to point out that expressive writing has been found to be ineffective in very few populations. Sexton and Pennebaker (2009) point out that a broad range of groups have benefited from expressive writing thus far:

- Samples have included college students, maximum-security psychiatric inmates, unemployed engineers, Holocaust survivors, and also patient cohorts who suffer from ailments such as chronic pain, arthritis, asthma, breast cancer, and posttraumatic stress disorder. Labs across the world have found benefits, including those in the United States, Mexico, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, and New Zealand (p. 267).

- It is possible that these same populations would find benefit from engagement with Interactive Journaling, given its close alignment with expressive writing, but this merits further research.

**Interactive Journaling and Novelty**

Novelty has been cited as a helpful approach for sustaining the efficacy of positive interventions over time (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Interactive Journaling might promote novelty of activities in three ways: first, the psychoeducational component of the practice may educate participants on the value of novelty in enhancing well-being. Second, Interactive Journaling can teach and prescribe a wide variety of activities that promote well-being. Finally, Interactive Journaling can be prescribed by practitioners alongside a range of other activities and interventions as a way to increase novelty in daily practice.
Interactive Journaling and Effective Positive Intervention Outcomes

Research demonstrates that the most effective positive interventions promote kindness, positive relationships, goal achievement, and social engagement (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Once again, using Interactive Journaling’s combination of psychoeducation, reflection, and calls to action might be one way to target these specific outcomes.

Figure 5

Alignment of Positive Interventions to Interactive Journaling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Interventions</th>
<th>Interactive Journaling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promote well-being</td>
<td>Targets specific well-being outcomes through psychoeducation, reflective journaling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draw on empirically tested frameworks</td>
<td>Currently utilizes expressive writing and motivational interviewing – may incorporate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are intentional and agentic</td>
<td>Encourages ownership of the practice and freedom to write in a way that is personal to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasize person-activity fit</td>
<td>A more accessible fit for underserved populations; customizable in terms of population,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote kindness, positive relationships,</td>
<td>Combines psychoeducation, reflection, and goal achievement, social goal achievement,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>goal achievement, social engagement</td>
<td>calls to action to target specific outcomes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Interactive Journaling aligns with many of the criteria of positive interventions.
Can Interactive Journaling Enhance Existing Positive Interventions?

Across dozens of researched and proposed positive interventions, writing functions as an important mediator of well-being. There are multiple mechanisms by which this function takes place. In some interventions, writing prompts facilitate reflection, processing, and meaning making of past events. Prompts may also facilitate greater mindful awareness of events in the present. Others serve a relational function by enabling positive interpersonal experiences. Finally, writing interventions may facilitate planning for positive futures. In many interventions, more than one of these mechanisms are simultaneously at play.

If these writing processes enhance positive interventions (or, in some cases, serve as the core of the intervention), it stands to reason that Interactive Journaling could employ these same mechanisms to enhance the efficacy of existing positive interventions. The pages that follow will explore this further.

Writing for reflection/processing.

Some positive interventions utilize writing prompts that facilitate deeper reflection and processing of events from the past (including the very recent past). Examples of this include the following:

- Keeping a gratitude journal: Participants write down at least five things they are grateful for each day (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).
- Finding three good things: Described earlier as the three good things exercise, participants write down three good things that happen to them each day as well as the cause of the positive events (Seligman et al., 2005).
Interactive Journaling as a Positive Intervention

- Writing a letter of forgiveness: Participants write a letter of forgiveness to a person who has wronged them in the past addressing the offense, the writer’s feelings, and a commitment to forgive. Participants do not deliver the letter (Magyar-Moe, 2014).
- Positive reframing: Participants consider their typical responses to challenging situations and write a positive reframe they might use instead (Schnitker & Emmons, 2011; Schnitker & Westbrook, 2014)
- Finding three funny things: Similar to the three good things intervention, participants write down their three funniest experiences each day with an explanation for why each one occurred (Gander et al., 2013, Ruch & McGhee, 2014).

Writing to increase mindfulness.

Positive interventions may use writing as a mechanism for facilitating greater present-moment awareness of day-to-day events. Examples of this mechanism are as follows:

- Savoring kindness: Participants become aware of and write down times when they find themselves being generous, kind, or friendly (Otake et al., 2006; Day et al., 2014).
- Savoring two experiences per day: Participants are encouraged to slow down to savor at least two experiences per day; whether by sharing them with others, taking “mental photographs,” congratulating themselves on an accomplishment, focusing on certain parts of the experience, or completely immersing themselves in the experience (Day et al., 2014).
- Savoring the role of others in an achievement: Participants take time each day to savor the role that others played in one of their achievements, considering areas that were made possible by others’ support (Smith et al., 2014).
• Savoring your own role in an achievement: Participants take time each day to thoughtfully reflect on their own role in one of their achievements, including obstacles they overcame in order to be successful (Smith et al., 2014).

It is worth noting that some interventions in the reflection/processing group would also fall into this category: individuals keeping a gratitude journal or noting three good things each day, for example, are likely to be more present for their gratitude experiences as they are occurring, knowing they will be recording them later.

**Writing for future planning.**

In some cases, rather than having participants reflect on the past or become more mindful of the present, interventions will foster the planning or imagining of positive futures. This mechanism can be found in the following interventions:

• Imagining one’s best possible future self: As previously described in this paper, this intervention allows participants to imagine and write about a future where everything has gone well and they have achieved all of their major life goals (King, 2001).

• Considering how strengths might inform the future: After taking a strengths inventory, participants write about how their personal strengths, interests, and personality traits might inform an important decision, like a major and career choice (Shin & Steger, 2014).

• Doing a future-focused “life review”: Participants consider how they would like to be remembered by their grandchildren and write down a description of this vision. Later, they read their writing and reflect on any changes they would like to make in the present in order to achieve this future narrative (Schueller, 2010; Smith et al., 2014).
• Setting positive future goals: Participants go through a five-step process for setting goals, starting with a freewriting activity that allows them to imagine a number of desirable futures. Subsequent steps include learning about goals, evaluating goals, finalizing goals, making progress, and integrating goals into a meaningful narrative (Sheldon et al., 2002; Shin & Steger, 2014).

**Writing for relational enhancement.**

Some interventions combine writing with intentional interpersonal experiences in order to enhance the social well-being of participants. The following are some examples of this mechanism in positive interventions:

• Keeping a “significant other gratitude journal”: Participants write down three things each day they are grateful for in their partner, then share them with their partner (Magyar-Moe, 2014).

• Active constructive responding: Participants engage in active-constructive responding – a way of responding positively to the good news others share with you (Gable et al., 2006). They then write about what was shared, how they responded, and how the other person responded (Day et al., 2014).

• Writing and delivering a letter of gratitude: In this intervention, previously described in this paper as the *gratitude visit*, participants write a letter of gratitude to a person who has helped them in some way, but who they have not thanked. They then read the letter out loud to this person (Gander et al., 2013; Seligman et al., 2005).

• Sharing funny observations: After observing and writing down funny situations throughout the day, participants share them with others (Ruch & McGhee, 2014).
Note. Writing interventions might be grouped into four primary categories: reflection/processing, mindfulness, planning, and relational.

The potential for Interactive Journals to enhance positive interventions.

The volume of writing activities in the positive intervention family tells us there is something significant about this process. Beyond merely thinking about three good things, our well-being is improved when we slow down and put these things on paper. Beyond simply imagining a future self that has accomplished all her goals, we paint a picture of this self with our words – adding texture and detail that makes this vision more vibrant and attainable. Writing a gratitude letter anchors our appreciation concretely on paper, making it more likely to reach the ears of the recipient in exactly the way we want it to.

We know that this significance is not just about the writing itself. Indeed, in many studies on writing interventions, the control group is charged with a writing task as well – but on a
benign topic such as a description of the room they are sitting in. Rather, the writing directives in these interventions are meant to lead participants to a specific discovery about the self – whether related to forgiveness, goal setting, awe, gratitude, humor, or realization of one’s strengths.

Pennebaker and Chung (2012) summarize a number of theories on why this process may be so powerful. These include that the writing process releases inhibitions for emotional disclosure; allows for emotional expression, labeling, and processing through language; facilitates narrative construction of a positive identity; changes a person’s social interactions for the better; and allows for insights that lead to life course corrections (Pennebaker & Chung, 2012).

Positive interventions that involve writing about the past, present and future – and that at times invite relational activities as a way to bring about target outcomes – could be incorporated into Interactive Journaling with relative ease. Without altering the writing activities themselves, Interactive Journals might simply add context to them – explaining their benefits, providing examples of how they might function through relevant first-person examples, and using infographics and other imagery to reinforce the information presented. Additionally, the durability and permanence of Interactive Journals may increase the likelihood that participants would save them and return to them in the future. Individuals may use a Journal as a reference for how an intervention is to be completed, as a reminder about where they were at a certain moment in their past, or for insights about how far they have come in their own personal growth. In all of these ways, Interactive Journaling may enhance the efficacy of these interventions, or perhaps increase the longevity of their effects.
Future Directions

“Writing has so much to give, so much to teach, so many surprises.” - Anne Lamott (1994)

Anecdotally, individuals and teams that develop Interactive Journals professionally describe increased psychological literacy and improvements in their personal lives as a result of daily engagement with the Journals and their content (D. Kuhl, personal communication, June 26, 2021). However, this observation is hardly scientific – disseminating Interactive Journals across populations and measuring well-being against control groups will lead to greater insights on the relevance of this tool as a mechanism for improving well-being more broadly.

Most existing studies on Interactive Journaling make it difficult to determine how much of the effects can be attributed to the Journals alone. These studies have primarily been applied to rehabilitative populations, such as those in correctional, treatment, or impaired driving education environments. Further, target outcomes in these populations are mostly related to recidivism reduction, recovery from substance use, or desisting from harmful behaviors.

More stringent research is needed to determine the potential contributions of Interactive Journaling to specific populations and to various well-being outcomes. Beyond rehabilitative goals, how might Interactive Journals enhance well-being in corporate, government, education, healthcare, or one-to-one coaching environments?

Existing well-being measures such as the PERMA-Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016), the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) or the PANAS (Watson et al., 1988) might be used to assess outcomes related to the Interactive Journaling process to determine their potential for well-being enhancement. Additionally, Journals on specific well-being topics might utilize more
targeted measurement tools. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire, for example (Steger, 2006) might shed light on the impact of a Journal on meaning.

Well-being measures would be particularly insightful for Journals that incorporate existing positive interventions. Might we anticipate similar or greater effects on well-being when these interventions are applied in Journals, as opposed to traditional methods of implementation? Understanding Interactive Journaling within the framework of positive psychology offers fascinating opportunities for future research.

**Conclusion**

Positive interventions might be considered the “application arm” of positive psychology – continually seeking new ways to enhance the well-being of individuals and groups, and in turn progressing ever closer to the goal of positive psychology to “show the world what actions lead to well-being, to positive individuals, to flourishing communities, and to a just society” (Seligman, 1998, p. 2). Pen-to-paper processes like expressive writing play a prominent role in this aspiration, demonstrating over the years numerous benefits on physical and mental health in a range of populations. The practice of Interactive Journaling, which draws heavily on the expressive writing paradigm, aligns closely with several criteria and best practices of positive interventions: the capacity to enhance well-being, the use of empirically tested frameworks, intentionality, emphasis on person-activity fit, and the promotion of a number of specific target well-being outcomes. In this way, the practice itself might be considered a positive intervention. Additionally, the effects of existing positive interventions might be enhanced by incorporating them into the Interactive Journaling format.
I joined the Master of Applied Positive Psychology Program, in part, because I wanted to bring the principles of positive psychology to underserved populations: those battling addiction, those who are justice-involved, those grappling with mental health challenges. Over the course of my time in this program, I realized that not only is the field giving something to me to pass on to these groups, but that the tools I develop every day might also offer something to the field of positive psychology. Interactive Journaling, as this paper has shown, is relevant to almost all of us. In a digital age, it can be helpful to slow down and reflect on the past, mindfully capture the present, or plan for a positive future. While this can certainly be done (and perhaps sometimes should be) in the free-flowing form of a journal or notebook, concrete goals sometimes benefit from structured processes. Interactive Journals provide an accessible, engaging, and user-friendly format for this structure to take place.

One wonders if it is possible to write one’s way to becoming happier. Does the practice of Interactive Journaling truly have the potential to bring about greater insight, self-regulation, meaning-making, positive identity formation, and joy in life? I believe it does, and I invite researchers, practitioners, and individuals seeking change to join me in exploring this possibility.
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Appendix A: Gratitude Journal

The Gratitude Journal presented here introduces participants to the benefits and various activities of a gratitude practice. This example demonstrates how positive interventions might be built into the practice of Interactive Journaling, enhancing their efficacy and promoting specific well-being outcomes. It is possible that this Journal could be part of a “well-being series” of Interactive Journals – incorporating topics like optimism, resilience, forgiveness, and mindfulness.

The following pages are used with permission from The Change Companies. Thanks to Kyla Hutchison, Christine Kegel, Susan Peterson, and Reba Nutting for editing and design assistance.
Page 2 provides a summary of Journal contents.

Page 3 defines gratitude (see Emmons & Shelton, 2002) and sets up the core objective of the Journal: to help participants explore multiple gratitude-enhancing activities.
Page 4 explains several benefits of gratitude, including emotional, relational, and physical health benefits (see Emmons & McCullough, 2003; McCullough et al., 2002; McCullough et al., 2004).

Page 5 provides space for participants to reflect and write about one benefit of gratitude they have already experienced.
Page 6 defines a gratitude practice, and allows participants to consider three ways they have already practiced gratitude in their lives.

Page 7 sets up the practices that participants will be introduced to in the next section of the Journal, and asks participants to describe some reasons why adding a gratitude practice to their lives might be important to them.
Page 8 describes the value of simply contemplating gratitude (see Chan, 2010). Participants have the opportunity to draw or write what comes to mind when they contemplate what they are grateful for.

Page 9 provides instructions for a simple gratitude meditation (see Kyeong et al., 2017). Participants describe what came up for them when trying this practice.
As a warm-up to the *three good things* exercise on the following page, participants write three things they are grateful for across the categories of relationships, senses, wisdom, and abilities.
Page 12: Participants are provided a page for beginning their *three good things* practice for the next three days (see Gander et al., 2013; Seligman et al., 2005).

Page 13: Participants learn the value of finding a person with whom they can share their gratitude experiences (a “gratitude partner”) (see Lyubomirsky, 2007).
Pages 14-15: Participants prepare and then write a gratitude letter (see Gander, 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Seligman, 2005;).
Participants learn about savoring (Bryant, 2003; Rashid & Anjum, 2008; Seligman et al., 2006) and describe an event from their past they continue to savor today.

Participants consider the value of letting go of things outside of their control.
Page 18: Participants learn about positive reframes of challenging events (see Ellis & Ellis, 2011), and describe how they might reframe an adversity they are currently experiencing.

Page 19: Participants are introduced to the value of keeping a gratitude journal (see Emmons & McCullough, 2003) and practice gratitude journaling by writing one thing they are grateful for today, and an act of kindness they witnessed recently.
Pages 20-21: These pages allow participants to freely journal about something they are grateful for.
Page 22: Participants consider some changes they have already experienced as they have brought more gratitude into their lives.

Page 23: Participants write down the most important takeaways from their work in this Journal and describe some next steps they would like to take to bring a daily practice of gratitude into their lives.
Interactive Journaling as a Positive Intervention