

Nourish to Flourish

Nourish to Flourish brings together practitioners' voices and creative practices, and wide-ranging reviews of books that support strengths-based approaches to human interactions.

Book Appreciation



Neena Verma

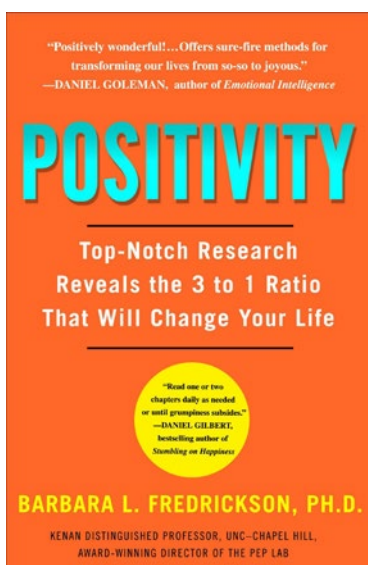
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Positivity: Groundbreaking Research to Release Your Inner Optimist and Thrive

By **Barbara Fredrickson**

Oneworld Publications, 2010

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Positivity is such an everyday word, thrown in casually as a state-descriptor, advice, a judgement, a sermon, even a lament if it is perceived to be missing or inadequate. We all seem to be experts on positivity. Yet if we were to try to support our understanding of positivity with an intellectual argument, we might have little to say beyond a subjective understanding which may or may not hold meaning for others.

The seminal work of Barbara Fredrickson presents a unique view of “positivity”. We may all be familiar in our personal or relational experience of what she calls “inner well-spring of positivity” and “negativity landmines”. However, what we may not be so clear about is the intricate nature of the phenomenon called “positivity” and the impact it creates when we “broaden and build” our outlook. The author presents

an interesting concept called open heart study (not surgery!) which, according to her, not only creates a self-renewing experience of positive emotions but also an upward spiral of growth. Let us discover more about her book.

The hallmark themes

The first key theme running throughout the proposition of Fredrickson's work, is two core truths about positivity. The first core truth is that "positive emotions open our heart and make us more receptive and creative". What is new or ground-breaking about this? It is Fredrickson's experiments-based explanation of the difference that positive experience, negative experience and neutral experience states make on the outcome of the task we undertake. Though these conditioned states were tested as design experiments, they established outcomes consistently found to be true, even as lived experiences. This core truth explains the essence of the "broaden effect", the first distinctive proposition made by the author.

Positive emotions open our heart and make us more receptive and creative.

The second core truth presented by author asserts that "positivity transforms us for the better", unleashing opportunity to grow and expand our psychological, mental, social and physical resources. Again, this core truth may seem like what is already obvious and widely known. Indeed, it is. With the second core truth that Fredrickson describes as "build effect", she helps clarify our instinctive, inherited knowledge by sharing results of her open-heart study experiments. What stands out for me is the story that author chose to describe to build the case for open-heart effect. This riveting transformation story says more than her research on more than over hundred stories of personal change, collected with real-time data and researched with scientific rigour.

Nina's story

Nina's transformation speaks to my heart, not because the protagonist is my namesake (albeit with different spelling), but because it feels so "my-own". I like to think that in different parts and aspects, this story would feel so my-own to many readers. Nina's transformation is an inspiring account of purposeful, mindful, self-responsible positivity practice creating a life-affirming upward spiral of personal growth. Starting with a low positivity ratio of 1:1, punctuated by overwhelming stress, the feeling of being "in a rut" with psychosomatic symptoms (terrible headaches, stomach pains and failed attempts to conceive) she grew to feel acceptant, forgiving, kind, self-loving and naturally appreciative of seemingly small but subtle life-giving experiences and the wonders of nature. Over time Nina's positivity ratio grew to an impressively high 6:1. In her words,

Positivity transforms us for the better.

It takes conscious, heart-felt practice to make positivity a real, lived experience.

her positivity journey resulted in “finding myself again”. The heartening highlight of her story is that in course of time she gave birth to twins.

So how did this magic happen? She attributes it to a combination of meditation and conscious positivity practice which, over time, became reflexive habits. This is how open heart study unravels the not-so-obvious truth about positivity – that it takes conscious, heart-felt practice to make positivity a real, lived experience, much more than nicely worded positivity commonplaces.

The portfolio of positive emotions

Another theme of the book is Fredrickson’s description of ten forms of positive emotions. Reading about them in isolation may not make much of mark, until you read about the portfolio of these positive emotions that one can self-build. Such a personally designed positive emotion portfolio helps because different emotions may need different methods to grow.

Perhaps the most practically useful theme of the book is the positivity ratio. Fredrickson expands her positivity framework by incorporating the mathematical model of her broaden-and-build theory, developed by Marcial Losado, the scholarly practitioner of positivity. Together they establish a positivity-ratio tipping-point of 3:1. She backs it with her positivity-ratio self-test.

At first glance this test may seem simplistic and temptingly deceptive. But a deeper view helps one notice the clever clustering of three emotions together to describe each of the twenty self-mapping invites: I prefer to call them invites rather than commonly used “item/statement”, because each of these statements took me to one or another lived life instance. This provided opportunity for me to revisit, without ruminating, parts of my history with reflective, self-inspiring invites to learn, change and grow.

The ground-breaking research about positivity is presented in a way that speaks convincingly both to the rational, scientific minded as well as the intuitive, in-the-flow reader.

The reader may well be right to think that lot of what is written about positivity, strategies and the tools to increase it is common knowledge. However, this book makes a difference by substantiating and building what we already seem to know, with the science behind positivity and by explaining the principles behind the practice tools. Importantly, the ground-breaking research about positivity is presented in a way that speaks convincingly both to the rational, scientific minded as well as the intuitive, in-the-flow reader.

Hard and soft 'positivity'

Barbara Fredrickson establishes her credibility as a scientist of psychology. Her focus on quantitative evidence and command of inferring meaning from the same is impressive. There are data and more data, at times disrupting the flow of reading. There are parts where the author seems overly concerned with explaining what seems clear and understandable, such as explaining why she approximated a mathematical derivative of the tipping point for the positivity ratio from 2.9013:1 to 3:1. She is, by her own admission, "a measurement junkie". But that is exactly the distinctive appeal of her work.

Some phrases and titles, like "positivity feels good", "decrease negativity", "increase positivity" may seem so trite that the reader feels like putting the book down. Even if such common-place references, data and scientific focus feels a bit too much, I would encourage the reader to stay tuned for the anecdotal elaborations of the subject. Barbara Fredrickson deftly and evocatively combines the scientific argument with the human element of positivity.

In particular, her own stories about her meditation experience, about the 9/11 tragedy in the United States, and about how her husband's surgery and life-threatening condition put her in a state where living her own concepts helped her broaden and build her resources, grow more resilient, and "for the first time learn to truly receive". Each story gives a heartening glimpse of the human behind the scientist; that is the paradoxical beauty of the book. Her other admission also inspires – "I'd long known the benefits of positive emotions in a scholarly way; I felt those benefits now more intensely and poignantly than ever before." Though the title and focus of the book is positivity, Fredrickson's work is realistic in its acknowledgement of negativity. To her credit, she offers a fair view of appropriate negativity, arguing that human flourishing would be limited if negativity were denied its natural existence as an essential part of human life. She explains this with the wonderful analogy of levity (the force that lifts one skyward) and gravity (the opposite force that pulls one earthward). She argues that human flourishing needs an optimal combination of both these forces. Her simple, yet strong, explanation is that while appropriate negativity keeps one grounded in reality, heartfelt positivity provides the lift needed for buoyant, flourishing life. Even as the author has heavily dosed her work with data and scientific evidence, to her credit she keeps affirming the inherent human truth that positivity is positive only when heartfelt and authentic.

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Frederickson

Fredrickson offers several positivity-practice tools, some of which may seem simplistic and familiar. That said, even though they may feel familiar, many of us do not actively and consistently practice positivity. This is where this

book's positivity toolkit may serve as a reminder for us to consciously practice positivity.

I have read this book before. Re-reading it and writing a review reinforced essential aspects of the phenomenon of positivity, as it also opened new vistas. A reader like me might wish for less data and analysis and more anecdotal flow of the book. However, this is exactly the creative challenge and invitation for us – to open ourselves to a unique, fresh scientific understanding of the phenomenon of positivity, supported by personal stories in fair measure. And, of course, for left-brained, rational-preferring readers, this book is a treat.

The book is easily available on all online market places.



Barbara Fredrickson is Kenan Distinguished Professor of Psychology and principal investigator of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Laboratory (a.k.a. PEP Lab) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Winner of several awards for her research and teaching, her research establishes with scientific evidence how positive emotions, fleeting as they are, can tip the scales toward a life of flourishing. She created her broaden-and-build theory to describe how positive emotions shape people's health and well-being.

Discover more about her, the 'Positivity' book, the 'Positivity Ratio' self-test and her other tools at – <https://www.positivityratio.com/>

[Back to Table of Contents](#)