



Feeling tired?

How sharing positive experiences can boost vitality

Nathaniel M. Lambert · A. Marlea Gwinn · Frank D. Fincham · Tyler F. Stillman

Abstract: People frequently speak of being tired, and chemicals like caffeine are consumed to make people feel energetic. How might one increase a sense of energy without resorting to substances? In three studies we document how sharing positive experiences with others makes people feel more energetic. Study 1 ($N = 197$) showed a relationship between naturally occurring sharing of positive events and vitality, such that the more often participants shared positive events at Time 1 the more vitality they reported three weeks later (controlling for initial levels of vitality). In Study 2 ($N = 188$) participants who shared a positive event (versus not sharing an event) reported higher levels of vitality. Study 3 ($N = 96$) showed that participants who shared a positive event with a partner (as opposed to engaging in a mildly positive interaction with their partner) reported higher vitality than did control participants. Implications of the research are discussed.

Keywords: vitality, sharing experiences, capitalization, energy

1. Introduction

Approximately 400 billion cups of coffee were sold in 2009 (Coffee Statistics Report, 2010). It is reasonable to assume that people do not feel as energetic as they would like to feel and that this accounts, in part, for the high level of consumption. Vitality is defined as having physical and mental energy (Ryan et al., 2010) or an enthusiasm and excitement for life. Vitality is related to several indicators of physical and mental health. In terms of physical benefits, vitality is negatively associated with coronary heart disease (Kubzansky & Thurston, 2007), sleep disturbance and somatic illnesses (Stewart, Hays, & Ware, 1992), and headaches (Ryan & Frederick, 1997). With regard to mental health, higher vitality is associated with increased self-actualization (sense that you are fulfilling your potential), self-esteem, and self-determination (degree to which one's behavior is self-motivated) (Ryan & Frederick, 1997), greater autonomy (ability to act freely and independently) (Deci & Ryan, 1991), greater motivation (Ryan & Frederick, 1997), perception that one's problems in life are less severe (Thayer, 1987) and less depression (De Negri & Moretti, 1971). Given these implications for physical and mental health, it is important to identify factors that may contribute to or enhance vitality. One likely candidate is sharing positive experiences.

2. Sharing positive experiences

Sharing positive experiences is correlated with higher degrees of positive affect and life satisfaction (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004) and people share their daily positive experiences between 60% and 80% of the time (Gable et al., 2004). Although people share



positive experiences quite frequently, little is known about the effects on mental health of such sharing.

Labott, Ahleman, Wolever, and Martin (1990) found that when participants watched a happy video their immune system showed heightened activity, but only if they were instructed to express their emotions. This study suggests that the act of sharing a positive emotion with another person has benefits above and beyond simply experiencing the positive event. Another study found that sharing a positive event is correlated with heightened memory of that particular event (Gable et al., 2004). It could be that as positive events are more easily remembered, they will be able to continue to have positive effects (later positive affect and coping). Though a positive response should be partly due to the positivity of the actual event, Langston (1994) found that sharing a positive event generated unique positive affect that went beyond the affect elicited from the valence of the positive event alone.

3. Why sharing should translate into vitality

We propose that sharing a positive experience with another person may translate into vitality for a few reasons. First, the feeling of relatedness (feeling significant and connected) engendered during an interchange should boost vitality in the same way that social relatedness has been positively related to vitality (Gagne, Ryan, & Bargmann, 2003; Howell & Hill, 2009; Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000).

Second, sharing positive experiences is a joint endeavour between the sharer and the listener, which has the potential to produce an effect on vitality that is greater than what might have occurred without the joint effort. During the sharing of a positive experience the sharer recruits the listener to perform a specific function—to assist in completing his/her appraisal of the experience and to validate the experience. For instance, imagine that Sue shares her good news of receiving praise from her boss and Eli replies, “That’s great! That should help you get that raise you’ve been hoping for.” Eli’s acknowledgement of the potential positive implications of the event for Sue’s future makes the impact of her positive experience more salient and may generate additional positive implications of the event that had not previously crossed her mind.

Finally, sharing something positive has the potential to boost the mood of the listener and thus the person sharing may gain excitement and energy by making someone else feel positively. For example, if Tyler tells his wife Deborah about increasing his sales during the month, this may have implications for Deborah and would likely make her genuinely happy. Seeing her pleasure is likely to make Tyler more excited about his accomplishment and enhance his vitality.

4. Overview of studies

In three studies we tested whether sharing a positive experience increases vitality (energy, or enthusiasm for life) for the person who shared. Study 1 tested whether people who shared positive experiences more frequently demonstrate greater vitality three weeks after sharing than do those who are disinclined to share positive experiences, controlling for initial vitality. Study 2 examined the hypothesis that sharing a positive event leads to greater vitality than simply experiencing it. Participants wrote about something good that happened to them in the past two weeks. Then, half of the participants were randomly assigned to both share this event with a relationship partner and complete the dependent measure, while the other half simply completed the dependent measure.

Study 3 sought to clarify the findings in Study 2 by ruling out an alternative explanation that the interaction with a partner, rather than specifically sharing the positive event, is what provided a lift in vitality. Taken together, the following studies provide evidence for a relationship between sharing positive experiences and feeling vitality.

5. Study 1

The objective of Study 1 was to test the relationship between sharing positive experiences and vitality. We hypothesized that participants who shared their positive experiences more frequently at Time 1 would have higher levels of vitality at Time 2, three weeks later, after controlling for initial vitality.

5.1 Method

5.1.1 Participants

Participants were 196 undergraduate students (162 women) who agreed to participate in exchange for extra credit. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 41 with a median age of 19.

5.1.2 Pre and post measures

Sharing positive experiences. We created a four-item measure that assessed the degree to which participants shared positive experiences with others. Example questions included, "I am the type of person that loves to share it with others when something good happens to me," and "I'm constantly telling people my good news." Choices ranged from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree." The alpha at Time 1 was .89.

Vitality. We used Ryan and Frederick's (1997) seven-item scale to measure vitality. Sample items include "I feel alive and vital", "I look forward to each new day", and "I feel energized". Items were rated using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 7 = "Strongly agree"). Coefficient alpha at both Time 1 and Time 2 was .91.

5.2 Results

5.2.1 Attrition

Fifty-six participants failed to complete measures at Time 2. To ensure that attrition did not affect the results, we compared Time 1 scores of participants that dropped out with those who remained in the study. No differences between the groups was found for vitality, $F(1, 251) = .49, p > .05$.

5.2.2 Sharing positive experiences and mental health: pre- and post-test results

We used hierarchical regression analysis to determine whether initial sharing of positive news predicts later vitality when controlling for initial vitality scores and gender. Given differences in communication styles between men and women, we controlled for gender. As predicted, greater tendency toward sharing of positive experiences at Time 1 was associated with greater vitality scores four weeks later, controlling for initial vitality and gender ($\beta = .21, p < .01$).

5.3 Discussion

Our hypothesis was supported inasmuch as the tendency to share positive experiences is positively related to changes in vitality over time. A limitation of the current study is that it is correlational and therefore causality cannot be confidently inferred. Moreover, we are unable to

determine whether the positive events themselves or the sharing of them increased vitality. Finally, the alternative explanation that more energetic people have a higher tendency to share positive experiences needs to be ruled out. We address these limitations in the experimental studies that follow.

6. Study 2

The objective of Study 2 was to experimentally test the relationship between sharing positive experiences and vitality. Our hypothesis was that the participants who shared a positive event will have higher levels of vitality as opposed to those who simply thought and wrote about a positive experience.

6.1 Method

6.1.1 Participants

In an introductory undergraduate course, 188 participants (135 female) completed an online survey for extra credit. Participants came to the lab with either a romantic partner or with a close friend.

6.1.2 Measures

Vitality. We again used Ryan and Frederick's (1997) measure of vitality ($\alpha = .90$).

Positivity of the recalled event. Participants recalled a positive event. To ensure that the positivity of the event was not driving findings, we included two items: "How positive was the event?" and "How memorable was this?" that were summed. The items correlated highly, $r = .79$.

6.2 Procedure

Participants were instructed to "Think of something good that happened to you in the past two weeks. Please write a paragraph describing what happened in the space below." They were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions, a no-treatment condition and a sharing experience condition. Those in the control condition completed the vitality measure after writing about the positive experience. Those in the sharing condition were taken into a separate room and were asked to share what they wrote about with their partner or friend. Specifically, the participants were instructed to take "two minutes to share with your partner what happened and how you felt. Once you have had a chance to share, please ring the bell." They then completed the measure of vitality.

6.3 Results

A one-way analysis of variance revealed that participants in the sharing condition reported higher vitality ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.13$) than those in the control condition ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.36$), $F(1, 184) = 4.98$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .03$, after controlling for gender and positivity of the event.

6.4 Discussion

Consistent with our hypothesis, sharing a positive experience caused an increase in positive emotion, relative to a control group who also recalled the positive experience but did not share it with someone. This study provides evidence that sharing a positive experience has a stronger impact on vitality as opposed to thinking about the positive experience; however, it does not rule out the possibility that any interaction with a partner might produce a similar effect.

7. Study 3

The objective of Study 3 was to address an alternative explanation for Study 2, namely that the higher levels of vitality of those who shared the positive experience were simply due to the interaction with a partner or friend. Therefore, we added positive interaction as a control condition to more rigorously test whether sharing positive experiences increases vitality. We also added irritability as a control variable, given that such a feeling could come about during an interaction. Our hypothesis was that the participants who share their positive event will have higher vitality than those who simply experienced a mildly positive interaction.

7.1 Method

7.1.1 Participants

In an introductory course, 96 undergraduates (69 women) completed an online survey for extra credit. Ages ranged from 18 to 24 with a median of 19. Participants attended the session with either a romantic partner or with a close friend.

7.1.2 Measures

Vitality. We again used Ryan and Frederick's (1997) measure of vitality ($\alpha = .67$).

Alertness. To ensure that a difference in level of alertness between conditions was not responsible for the observed effects, we controlled for it in the analysis. Alertness was measured by one subtle item: "If you are paying attention, mark Strongly Agree."

Irritability. To ensure that irritability towards one's partner during the interaction was not driving the results, we controlled for it in the analysis. We measured irritability with the single item, "Describe the extent you feel irritable" on a scale from "Very Slightly or Not at All" to "Extremely."

7.2 Procedure

Participants were instructed as follows: "Please think of something good that happened to you in the past two weeks. Please write a paragraph describing what happened." Participants were then randomly assigned to either a sharing positive experience condition or to a neutral interaction condition.

7.2.1 Sharing of positive experience condition

As before, participants were taken into a separate room and were asked to share what they wrote about with their partner. Specifically, the participant was instructed to take "two minutes to share with your partner what happened and how you felt."

7.2.2 Neutral interaction condition: Procedure

This condition was developed to rule out the possibility that an interaction by itself could enhance vitality. Participants were instructed to take "two minutes to share with your partner something he/she learned in class this week."

7.3 Results

Given differences in communication styles between men and women, we again controlled for gender. A one-way analysis of variance revealed that participants in the sharing positive experiences condition reported higher vitality scores ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.15$) than those in the

neutral interaction condition ($M = 4.00$, $SD = .64$), $F(1, 91) = 5.48$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .06$ when controlling for feelings of irritation, alertness, and gender.

7.4 Discussion

Consistent with our hypotheses, participants who shared their positive event had more vitality compared to those in the writing/reflecting group that also had an interaction unrelated to the positive experience. This study provides further evidence that sharing positive experiences can generate positive affect above and beyond both recalling a pleasant experience and having a mildly positive interaction unrelated to the positive experience.

8. General discussion

In the current investigation, we found evidence for a non-pharmacological means of increasing physical and mental energy, namely, sharing positive experiences with others. In Study 1, we found that the tendency to share positive experiences with someone else at Time 1 predicted later vitality, controlling for baseline levels of vitality. Study 2 showed that participants who shared a positive event with a close friend reported higher vitality than those who simply wrote about a positive event. In Study 3, those assigned to share a positive experience with a partner demonstrated greater vitality than those who simply interacted with a partner.

Vitality is an important marker of psychological wellbeing, and feeling mentally and physically tired is generally considered unpleasant. Indeed, persistent fatigue is considered an illness (Chronic Fatigue Syndrome). The current work demonstrates that sharing positive experiences with others can combat feelings of lethargy. As such, this work fits with other studies documenting non pharmacological ways of increasing vitality, such as spending time in nature (Ryan et al., 2010).

8.1 Limitations and future directions

A limitation of our research is that the samples studied were limited to college-aged participants and may not be representative of more mature relationships. Thus, these findings should be replicated in a variety of age groups. Another limitation of the current studies is that individuals who shared the positive event spent more time thinking about the event than those who simply wrote about the event or who interacted about something other than the event. Such a potential confound should be ruled out in future studies. Finally, the current studies did not assess how the reaction of the partner affected vitality. It seems plausible that the reaction of the partner may potentially moderate the effects of sharing and this should be examined by future research.

In an era where technology is prevalent, there are now many different outlets for people to share their positive experiences. Blogging has grown to become one of the most popular methods of online expression. Though blogging has many uses, most Americans use their blogs to express themselves or reflect on their day (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). A fruitful area for future research would be to examine whether sharing positive events through blogging has a similar effect on mental health outcomes to in-person sharing or, alternatively, to determine what differences might exist between sharing through the blogosphere and in-person sharing. However, the results of Study 2 suggest that in-person sharing may have a stronger impact than simply writing about the event. Nonetheless, when writing in a blog there could be an effect of sharing with the “imagined audience.” Could the imagined audience have just as strong an effect as sharing in person? This question should be examined further.

Some initial research on blogging has found it to have positive effects on wellbeing and it has even been suggested as a form of therapy. For example, one study demonstrated that blogging improves social capital, which in turn has a positive effect on wellbeing (Ko & Kuo, 2009). Relatedly, blogging has a positive effect on perceived social support, specifically social integration, reliable alliance, and friendship satisfaction (Baker & Moore, 2008). Future research should build upon these initial findings, taking the results of the current study into account.

9. Conclusion

Our research indicates that sharing positive events can increase vitality. The benefits go beyond simply having a positive experience or sharing a neutral experience: Maximum vitality stems from a combination of both. The importance of increased vitality is emphasized by the documented association between higher energy and both physical and mental wellbeing.

Authors

Nathaniel M. Lambert
Brigham Young University
natemlambert@gmail.com

A. Marlea Gwinn
The University of Kentucky
andreamarlea@gmail.com

Frank D. Fincham
Florida State University
ffincham@fsu.edu

Tyler F. Stillman
Southern Utah University
tylerstillman@gmail.com

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