

a fun exercise for increasing closeness in couple relationships

(this exercise with links to the studies mentioned is a www.goodmedicine.org.uk 12.06.21 blog post)

The *Journal of Positive Psychology* regularly publishes very interesting, helpful articles. One that recently caught my eye is titled "*The marital version of three good things: A mixed methods study*". OK, maybe not the most catchy title, but the reference to '*three good things*' hooked my interest as this is a '*solo exercise*' that can be so helpful in nourishing our sense of gratitude, appreciation & wellbeing. For more on the '*solo exercise*', see the blog post on "*How to live well ... positivity, savouring & gratitude*", especially section 3.) and handouts highlighted in section 9.).

The authors of this recent '*marital version*' paper, write: "*Many couples' relationship lacks the prosperity that characterize a good marriage. To address this languishing, our study proposes an adaptation of the well-validated intervention Three Good Things and examines its effectiveness on marital quality. This mixed-method study comprised 134 heterosexual couples, randomly allocated into one of three groups: intervention, placebo, and no-treatment. Participants completed questionnaires aimed at measuring marital satisfaction, intimacy, and burnout, on three time points: before the intervention, immediately following it, and a month afterwards. At the end of the study period, the intervention and placebo groups answered an open-coded question about the effect the intervention had on their relationship. Results showed increased intimacy and decreased burnout in the intervention group, among participants who complied with the study procedure. A qualitative analysis of responses to the open-coded question found that most couples in the intervention group felt that the intervention had positively affected their emotions, behavior, and thinking.*"

Mm ... so what was the intervention? Details are described in the full version of the paper that can be downloaded for free from ResearchGate. They state: "*Once a week, after dinner and before going to sleep, set aside 15 minutes and spend them with your partner. During this time, please write down with your partner three good things that happened to you as a couple during the week. Do this once a week for six consecutive weeks. The three good things you list can be of relatively small or large importance. After each good thing on your list, answer in your own words the question, Why did this good thing happen?*" The authors further comment: "*Couples in the intervention group were requested to set aside 15 minutes per week (Chan, 2010), over six consecutive weeks, spend them together, devote this time to jointly think about three good things that happened to them as a couple during the week, and write those three things down as well as the reason they happened. We changed the frequency of the original intervention out of concern that a daily task would burden the couples and not give them enough time to create shared positive experiences, and to help them find a time when they could perform the exercise together. The frequency we chose is based on the work of Lyubomirsky and her colleagues (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005), who found that positive activities performed once a week resulted in larger increases in well-being compared to those same activities performed throughout the week.*"

It was noteworthy that to achieve benefits ... both for increased intimacy & decreased burnout ... it was important that both partners wanted to try the exercise and it wasn't just one partner pushing the other into doing it with them. Again the authors give helpful additional details saying: "*Analysis of the couples' reports yielded three different ways through which the intervention affected the relationship: first, the exercise directed participants' attention to the merits of their spouse and of their relationship, and enhanced positive feelings such as appreciation and sense of closeness; second, the intervention established a special weekly quality time for the couples, during which they discussed their relationship and fostered their communication; lastly, the intervention encouraged couples to initiate joint activities during the week.*" It's such a simple fifteen-minute exercise ... it feels well worth trying for six weeks and then deciding whether to revisit it more regularly after that as well.
