



A positive empathy intervention to improve well-being on Instagram.

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With more than half the global population on social media, there is a critical need to understand how to engage it in a way that improves rather than worsens user well-being. Here, we show that positive empathy is a promising tool.

Participants who received brief positive empathy instructions before 10 min of browsing their own Instagram feed showed greater affective well-being (Studies 1–4) and life satisfaction (Study 4) at posttest relative to participants who were instructed to browse as usual.

The positive empathy intervention showed an average effect size on well-being of about a quarter of a standard deviation (mean Cohen's $d = 0.25$). We included unique active control groups in each study.

We found using positive empathy on social media was about as beneficial to well-being as watching a nature video (Study 1, $N = 298$) and was better than instructions to focus on positive content (Study 2, $N = 302$), empathize with all emotions (Study 3, $N = 301$), or reappraise one's own emotions (Study 4, $N = 426$). We used structural equation modeling to demonstrate the effect of the intervention on subjective well-being is mediated by changes in positive emotion sharing, appreciative joy, and self-compassion.

These experiences form a latent factor we term positive empathy. Our results show that a brief intervention successfully manipulates positive empathy on Instagram, which increases well-being.

In the *positive empathy* intervention condition participants were told to browse their feed passively and **focus on observing positive emotions of people they care about in their feed**. They were told that when they saw positive emotions, they should **take a moment to pause and share the positive emotion (emotion sharing)**, be **happy that the other person is happy** (appreciative joy) and **celebrate this opportunity for shared happiness** (see Figure 2). Participants were instructed that if they started to think “I wish I had good news like this”, they should be kind to themselves (self-compassion) and remember that the post is about the other person, not the participant themselves. They were instructed to gently redirect their attention to sharing the positive emotion and being happy that the target is happy. Participants observed an example post on which they could practice this strategy. They then answered comprehension questions to ensure that they understood the instructions.

Figure 2

Sample of part of the positive empathy condition instructions

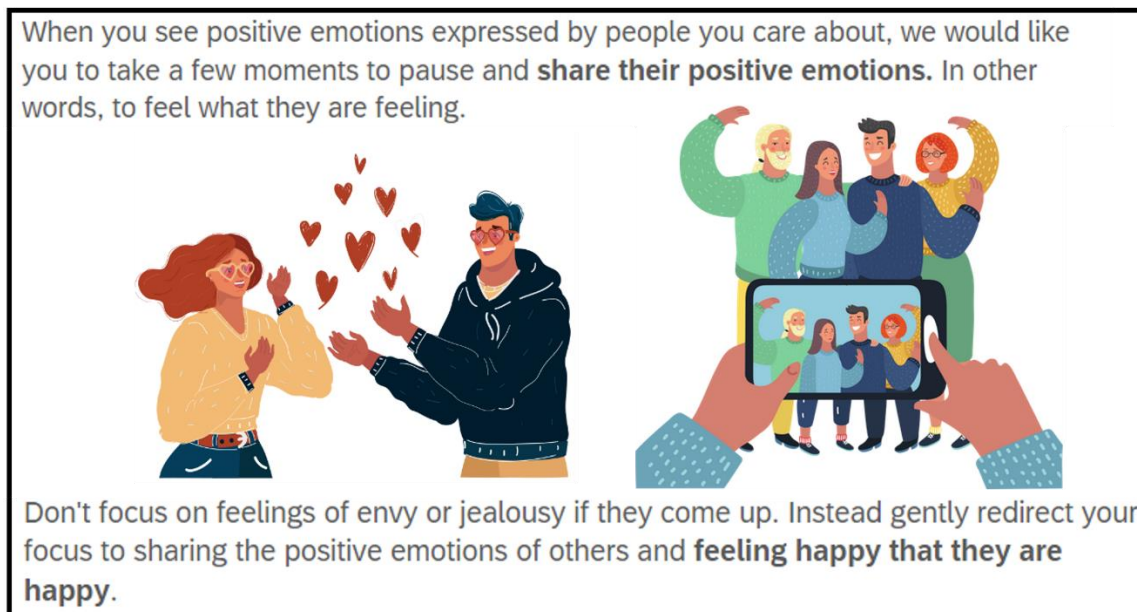


Image Description: Two cartoons of people being happy, with the text above the cartoons saying "When you see positive emotions expressed by people you care about, we would like you to take a few moments to pause and share their positive emotions. In other words, to feel what they are feeling."

The text below the two cartoons says "Don't focus on feelings of envy or jealousy if they come up. Instead gently redirect your focus to sharing the positive emotions of others and feeling happy that they are happy."