

**Mixing Business with Pleasure:  
Positive Psychology Interventions in the Workplace**

**2009 Education Graduate Student Symposium Paper  
University of Manitoba**

Candace Reinsch, B.A., M.A. (Sociology)  
M. Ed. Guidance & Counselling Graduate Student

Date: May 1, 2009

## Introduction

The emerging science of *positive psychology* – variously described as the scientific study of optimal human functioning, fulfillment, and authentic, enduring happiness – has flourished in the last eight years (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). With theory and research building a foundation for this new branch of psychology, publications on applications of positive psychology first began sprouting in the literature in 2004 (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Therapies and coaching interventions based on the notions of happiness, growth, and wellbeing also began gaining momentum. In 2006, a new therapeutic intervention for depression known as *positive psychotherapy* was introduced and presented as an empirically validated tool for application in the fields of counselling and clinical psychology (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006). The specific empirically validated components of positive psychotherapy and other wellbeing interventions include cultivating gratitude and optimism, exploring and enhancing signature strengths, expressive writing, active and constructive responding in relationships, and practicing savoring and mindfulness (Seligman et al., 2006; Dean & Biswas-Diener, 2007).

In an attempt to build on the promise of positive psychology's application to counselling practice, this paper outlines the writer's practicum thesis project proposal to meet the requirements of the University of Manitoba M.Ed. in Guidance and Counselling Program. The purpose of this project is to develop, implement and measure the impact of a mental health promotion (and psychopathology prevention) group therapy program guided by a positive psychology framework to a small group of employees of the Province of Manitoba. The project hypothesis is that an eight week positive psychology group counselling intervention will improve the self-reported quality of life, authentic happiness and fulfillment of a sample of civil servants

working for the Province of Manitoba. It is also anticipated that this intervention will decrease self-reported depressive symptomatology among project participants.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the core components of the writer's forthcoming formal practicum thesis proposal to the Faculty of Education. The first section provides an overview of the proposed methodology for the study, including the measurement framework. Discussion then turns to the conceptual framework of the happiness formula that will be used to guide the intervention. The final section provides an overview of the contents for each one of the eight sessions of the proposed group curriculum.

## **Proposed Methodology**

The specific contents of the positive psychology group counselling intervention proposed for this practicum thesis project will consist of a combination of topics, assessments and activities from positive psychotherapy (Seligman et al., 2006), quality of life therapy (Frisch, 2005), Csikszentmihalyi's work on flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991), positive psychology coaching (Dean & Biswas-Diener, 2007), and the positive psychology writings of Seligman (2002), Lyubomirsky (2007) and Ben-Shahar (2007), delivered in a psycho-educational and experiential group format by the writer.

It is proposed that this positive psychology group will be an eight week, two-hours-per-week intervention administered in a group of eight to twelve voluntary participants from a population of Government of Manitoba staff. On-site supervision for the project will be provided by counsellors with the Manitoba Government Employee Assistance Program. The Manitoba Government was selected as a site for implementation because the Province has been the writer's employer for over ten years

and the project provides the writer with a unique opportunity as a staff person to make a programming contribution to the corporate workplace health and wellness strategy of the Government of Manitoba.

The group counselling method of intervention was chosen as a treatment modality due to its demonstrated efficacy in helping people make changes in their lives (see Yalom, 2005). The greater number of relationships available in the group also provides richness and potential for learning, growth and change not possible in a dyad or a solitary situation. The greater number of relationships available in the group counselling method also has the potential to make a significant impact on each group member's perceived happiness because one of the most influential recent findings from positive psychology research is that social relationships make a very significant contribution to lasting personal happiness (Diener & Seligman, 2002).

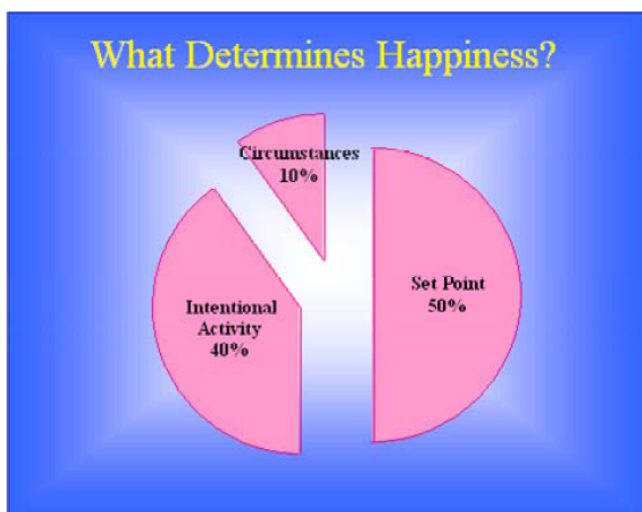
To measure the effectiveness of the intervention in increasing lasting happiness (commonly referred to in the literature as subjective wellbeing) and decreasing depressive symptoms, four standardized measures will be administered to participants both pre- and post- group: (1) General Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999); (2) Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985); (3) Positive Psychotherapy Inventory (Rashid, 2005); and (4) Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CES-D) Scale (Radloff, 1977).

## **Conceptual Framework**

The guiding conceptual framework for the group intervention will be based on the happiness formula work of Lykken (1999), Seligman (2002) and Lyubomirsky (2007). Even though a number of its core components were first developed by Lykken (1999), the

“father of positive psychology” Martin Seligman (2002) popularized the happiness formula of  $H = S + C + V$  in his best-selling book *Authentic Happiness*. This formula states that happiness is comprised of the individual’s set happiness point (S), the individual’s circumstances (C) and voluntary factors that are under the individual’s control (V). This is similar to Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and Schkade’s (2005) architecture for sustainable change model which states that happiness is 50% happiness set point, 10% life circumstances and 40% intentional activity (see Figure 1). These theories acknowledge the importance of the happiness set point and life’s circumstances but propose that happiness can be actively pursued by addressing the factors that are under the individual’s control. Unearthing the contents of the (V), or factors under one’s voluntary control, will therefore be the focal point for the group intervention.

Figure 1. Lyubomirsky’s happiness pie.



The idea of personal control, has, ironically, been somewhat overlooked by social scientists in general, and happiness researchers specifically, until recently. Early researchers were interested in how demographic variables such as age and gender –

factors completely out of the realm of personal control – affected subjective wellbeing (Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999). “Only in the past five years have positive psychologists begun to look at volitional activity and personal choice as a fruitful area to examine possible happiness interventions” (Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007).

The organizing framework for voluntary (V) variables that will be presented to the group as vehicles to create sustainable change are based on Seligman’s (2002) work. Seligman proposes that a person who is authentically happy leads a *full life*. Seligman’s full life incorporates three forms of happiness and as such is comprised of three elements: the pleasant life, the engaged/good life, and the meaningful life.

One core component of the (V) is enhancing positive emotions about the past, in the present, and for the future. The goal of addressing positive emotions in these three realms is to build the “pleasant life.” This pleasant life consists of having as many pleasures as you possibly can and having the skills to amplify those pleasures. It is of interest to note that this philosophy is consistent with the contemporary hedonic theory of wellbeing (Kahneman, Diener & Schwarz, 1999). Happiness from a hedonistic point of view concerns the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain and occurs when pleasurable experiences and sensory gratifications outweigh painful experiences.

The second core component of the (V) is using signature strengths and practicing flow to obtain abundant and authentic gratification to build the “engaged and meaningful life.” To Seligman (2006), the engaged life is vastly less biologically constrained than is the pleasant life. Everyone has strengths and virtues and the trick is to know what they are and then to be creative enough to deploy them as much as possible. Building this component of (V) has a close link with the eudaimonic theory of wellbeing (Waterman, 1993). Eudaimonic happiness results from the

actualization of individual potential and from fulfilling one's *daimon* or true self. This perspective has psychological roots in Maslow's (1968) concept of the self-actualizing individual and Roger's (1961) concept of the fully functioning person.

## Group Curriculum

The proposed eight week group session outline is presented in Figure 2. The working title for the group is currently "Unlocking the Secrets of Happiness: A Self-Exploration and Personal Development Group."

Figure 2. Group curriculum for eight week positive psychology group.

The graphic is a rectangular box with a thin black border. On the left side, there are three colored circles (dark teal, light teal, grey) and a vertical line. To the right of the line, the text reads: "Group Curriculum (Under Construction)". Below this, the text is underlined: "Proposed Eight Week Group Session Outline:". The list of sessions follows:

- Session 1. Introduction: Why Bother to be Happy?
- Session 2. The Happiness Formula
- Session 3. Signature Strengths
- Session 4. Satisfaction about the Past
  - Gratitude & Expressive Writing
- Session 5. Optimism about the Future
  - Learned Optimism & REBT/CBT for Pessimistic Thoughts
- Session 6. Happiness in the Present
  - Savoring, Mindfulness & Active-Constructive Responding
- Session 7. Flow
- Session 8. Wrap Up: Integration, Reflections & Evaluation

The guiding organizational framework for the eight week group developed by the writer was largely inspired by the format of an eight hour audio home-study course by Dr. Reid Wilson for Psychotherapy Networker - *Applying the Science of Happiness: Finding Flow in Your Life and Practice* (Wilson, 2006).<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive facilitator manual for the intervention is nearing completion by the writer and an overview of the contents for each one of the eight sessions of the

---

<sup>1</sup> This audio-home study course is deemed by Dr. Wilson to be an abridged version of Martin Seligman's Authentic Happiness Coaching course - a 48 hour, six month course that was delivered to more than 500 mental health professionals by Seligman in 2004.

curriculum is provided in this final section. It is anticipated that this project will make a valuable contribution to the field as facilitator and/or treatment manuals for administering positive psychology counselling interventions have not yet been published.

Session one is titled “Introduction: Why Bother to be Happy?” The session will commence with introductions and standard group opening tasks, administration of the standardized measures of happiness and depression, and then a relaxation/grounding activity. Group members will then explore what happiness means to them – a discussion that will include reviewing popular quotes on happiness and the sharing of a story titled “Wise Man of the Gulf” (Synder & Lopez, 2002). The four archetypes of happiness (Ben-Shahar, 2007) will be presented, followed by a self-reflection activity and discussion. A short presentation on Frederickson’s broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Frederickson, 2001) follows to provide an evolutionary purpose of positive emotions like happiness, along with research findings on the benefits of positive emotions, i.e., that such emotions build physical, social and intellectual resources. The session will close with a preview of the topics planned for future group sessions, followed by a check-out.

Session two is titled “The Happiness Formula.” Following the check-in and relaxation/grounding activity, which is a standard opening procedure for each session, participants will receive a presentation on what positive psychology has to say about happiness. The core topics for the presentation include Seligman’s happiness formula (Seligman, 2002), hedonic adaptation and the hedonic treadmill (Diener, Lucas & Scollon, 2006), and the impact of set point, circumstances and voluntary activities on self-reported lasting, authentic happiness (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). The focus will then turn to participants completing and discussing a true and false questionnaire designed by the writer on the impact of circumstances on happiness,



followed by viewing and discussing a seven-minute video clip on the world's happiest country (Sloan, 2008). What follows is an introduction to Frisch's happiness pie and its sixteen ingredients (Frisch, 2005), and then a self-reflection activity in which each participant draws his or her personal happiness pies – both real and ideal. The session closes with a check-out along with the assignment of a homework activity – completion of the Values in Action (VIA) signature strength survey (Seligman, 2002).

Session three focuses on “Signature Strengths.” After the relaxation and check-in, participants will be guided through a presentation on Seligman and Peterson's groundbreaking research on classifying and measuring universal human virtues and psychological strengths (Seligman & Peterson, 2004), their identification of six universal virtues and 24 strengths, and then the development of the VIA signature strengths survey – which enables individuals to identify their most personally relevant five *signature strengths* (Seligman, 2002). A large group discussion of each participant's signature strengths survey results comes next, followed by a discussion of additional ideas and activities for working with strengths to build gratification in the major domains of life, particularly work, love, play and parenting. As the session nears its close, participants are introduced to one of the next session's focus activities – gratitude – by completing a five-minute pen and paper exercise. The session ends with a check-out in which participants are invited to share a story about themselves that showed a strength, followed by the assignment of two homework activities designed by Seligman: (1) an activity on using your strengths in a new way; and (2) participants completing one of three gratitude exercises (the gratitude survey, sweet dreams and the gratitude visit).

Session four is titled “Satisfaction about the Past” and focuses on two empirically validated topics and interventions that have demonstrated capacity to improve self-reported

happiness – gratitude and expressive writing.<sup>2</sup> The session will commence with an exploration of definitions of gratitude, particularly gratitude as a warm sense of appreciation. The gratitude homework will then be reviewed, followed by a short presentation on the eight ways gratitude boosts happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2007). The second half of the session is dedicated to expressive writing about emotional experiences as a coping strategy. Participants are encouraged to share previous experiences with journaling and their ideas about the ways in which journaling can be helpful. After this introduction, participants will be led through an expressive writing activity based on the research and writing techniques of James Pennebaker (1997, 2004) and Tristine Rainer (1979). Discussion questions about the activity include noting any new discoveries about oneself, exploring feelings during the exercise, as well as noticing any changes in feelings before, during or after the exercise. As homework for the next session, participants will be asked to prepare a new journal entry using the best possible selves exercise (King, 2001).

Session five changes the temporal frame from the past to the future and is titled “Optimism about the Future.” This session focuses on two empirically validated topics and interventions that have demonstrated capacity to improve self-reported happiness about the future – learned optimism and using rational emotive behavioral therapy (also known as cognitive behavior therapy) to address pessimistic thoughts, and thereby build optimism. To introduce the concept of optimism as the session opens, participants will complete a short optimism-pessimism questionnaire (Fenman Limited, n.d.), and then a key to the questionnaire will be presented, followed by a discussion of results. A short presentation on research about optimism comes next and key topics include Seligman’s work on learned optimism (Seligman,

---

<sup>2</sup> Forgiveness, another empirically validated intervention with a focus on the past, was considered but not included in the curriculum. Biswas-Diener and Dean (2007) advised against using forgiveness interventions in the workplace because they “can be really tough. These interventions bring up sadness, can get too personal, and can seem too intrusive” (p. 107).

1990), how optimists and pessimists respond to failure, and the explanatory styles of permanence, pervasiveness and personalization. The “ABCDE” method (based on Albert Ellis’s rational emotive behaviour therapy) is then presented as a tool to dispute pessimistic thoughts and thereby increase optimism. The facilitator is encouraged to use a personal example to guide participants through the (A) adversity, (B) beliefs, (C) consequences, (D) disputation, and (E) energization of the model. To gain familiarity with the model, participants will then form pairs to work through personal examples of adversities using the model. As the session comes to a close, homework is assigned for participants to continue practicing using the ABCDE model during the week ahead using a prepared worksheet.

Session six focuses on the present and is titled “Happiness in the Present.” Empirically validated topics and interventions that have demonstrated capacity to improve self-reported happiness in the present are the focus of this session and include mindfulness, savoring and active and constructive responding in relationships. The session will open with a large group discussion of a reflection question on time perspective (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008). Specifically, participants will be asked to contemplate how much time they spend in the present moment, versus thinking about the past or planning for the future, followed by a reflection about how one’s particular balance is helpful or hindering. A presentation will follow on pleasures versus gratifications (which are connected to signature strengths), six techniques that prolong the pleasures, habituation and the loss of pleasure, and the concepts of “shortcuts” and “longcuts” (Seligman, 2002). This presentation sets the stage for the session’s focus discussion on savoring and mindfulness (a way of being in our lives as it is right now, in the present moment). The concepts are introduced by way of a novel experiential exercise on mindfully eating one raisin (Williams, Teasdale, Segal, & Kabat-Zinn, 2007), followed by a 30 minute video on mindfulness

with Jon Kabat-Zinn (Moyers, 1995). Kabat-Zinn is internationally known for his work as a scientist, writer, and meditation teacher engaged in bringing mindfulness into the mainstream of medicine and society. The focus discussion and experiential work then turns to active and constructive responding in relationships – a technique to build relationships by focusing on good news (Gable, Reis, Impett & Asher, 2004). After practicing the exercise in pairs, participants will have a large group discussion on how to apply the qualities of mindfulness (Shapiro, Schwartz & Santerre, 2002) in a significant relationship in each participant’s life. The session will close with two homework assignments: one on shortcuts and longcuts and the other on practicing mindfulness in everyday routine activities.

Session seven’s title is “Flow” and focuses on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s work on *flow*. The concept of flow, variously described as the state of engagement, optimal happiness and peak experience that occurs when an individual is absorbed in a demanding and intrinsically motivating challenge, will be introduced with a movie clip. A young man’s love of dance in the movie *Billy Elliott* (Hall & Daldry, 2000) is one suggestion. A presentation on flow will follow, including possible flow activities, the eight components of flow, developing skills toward flow, and the benefits of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Group members will then begin more personal explorations of flow through a large group brainstorm of personally meaningful flow activities, followed by a pairs exercise of describing one flow experience. A large group discussion on how to enhance our existing work activities, leisure activities and maintenance activities (i.e., chores) to achieve more flow will close the session.

The eighth and final session is titled “Wrap Up: Integration, Reflections & Evaluation.” Following the final check-in and relaxation/grounding activity, the standardized measures of happiness and depression that were introduced in session one will once again be administered to

participants. The session will focus on the following three group closing activities: (1) gifts of affirmation; (2) brainstorm of activities that contribute to happiness; and (3) identification of personal keys to happiness. For gifts of affirmation, each participant will be provided with a piece of colored construction paper. At the top they will write the name of the person to their left, write an affirmation line below it, and then pass the paper to the person to their right who will write the next affirmation line until the paper has gone around the circle. This will be a piece of writing that the participants take with them, as evidence of the community of sharing and support that the group provided. The second activity is a brainstorm and is based on a review of the range of activities that the group explored over the course of eight weeks. The purpose of the activity is to identify the specific components that were meaningful to participants in the pursuit of happiness, and any other activities generated will also be added to the list. The third and final activity is titled "Identifying Personal Keys to Happiness." For this activity, participants will be invited to choose at least three metal or paper keys (or key tags) from a quantity provided and write on them a key word or phrase that identifies a personal "key" to help them access happiness. Satin cord and/or key rings will be provided to allow participants to keep their "happiness keys" together, and also leave the group with a take-home talisman. As the session comes to a close, participants will complete final group evaluation forms, and then undertake a final check-out focused on sharing what worked and what did not work in the group, as well as any meaningful experiences or learnings.

An outline of the core components of the writer's forthcoming formal practicum thesis proposal is now complete. While positive psychology's ultimate impact on the field of counselling remains unknown at this early stage in the field's evolution, the writer is hopeful that positive psychology's momentum will continue to grow, and that the proposal outlined in this

paper can make a meaningful contribution not only to the literature, but also provide a meaningful experience in each Government of Manitoba participant's life and journey toward greater wellbeing and lasting happiness.

## References

- Ben-Shahar, T. (2007). *Happier: Learning the secrets to daily joy and lasting fulfillment*. New York: McGraw-Hill Books.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1991). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Dean, B., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2007). *Positive psychology coaching: Putting the science of happiness to work for your clients*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Diener, E., Emmons, R., Larsen, R., & Griffin, S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 49(1), 71-75.
- Diener, E., Lucas, R., & Scollon, C. (2006) Beyond the hedonic treadmill: Revising the adaptation theory of well-being. *American Psychologist*, 61, 305-314.
- Diener, E., & Seligman, M. (2002). Very happy people. *Psychological Science*, 13, 81-84.
- Diener, E., Suh, E., Lucas, R., & Smith, H. (1999). Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125, 276-302.
- Fenman Limited, (n.d.). *Learned optimism for success* [Training activity]. Cambridgeshire, UK: Fenman Professional Training Resources.
- Fredrickson, B. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56, 218-226.
- Frisch, M. (2005). *Quality of life therapy: Applying a life satisfaction approach to positive psychology and cognitive therapy*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

- Gable, S., Reis, H., Impett, E., & Asher, E. (2004). What do you do when things go right? The intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits of sharing positive events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *87*(2), 228-245.
- Hall, L. (Writer), & Daldry, S. (Director). (2000). *Billy Elliott* [Motion picture]. United States: Universal.
- Kahneman D., Diener E., & Schwarz N. (Eds.). (1999). *Well-Being: The foundations of hedonic psychology*. New York: Russell Sage Found.
- King, L. (2001). The health benefits of writing about life goals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* *27*(7), 798-807.
- Linley, P., & Joseph, S. (Eds.). (2004). *Positive psychology in practice*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Lykken, D. (1999). *Happiness: what studies on twins show us about nature, nurture and the happiness set-point*. New York: Golden Books.
- Lyubomirsky, S. (2007). *The how of happiness*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Lyubomirsky, S., & Lepper, H. (1999). A measure of subjective happiness: Preliminary reliability and construct validation. *Social Indicators Research*, *46*(2), 137-155.
- Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K. & Schkade, D. (2005). Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change. *Review of General Psychology*, *9*(2), 111-131.
- Maslow, A. (1968). *Toward a psychology of being* (2nd ed.). New York: Van Nostrand.
- Moyers. B. (1995). *Healing and the mind* [Television series]. New York: Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).
- Pennebaker, J. (1997). *Opening up: The healing power of expressing emotion*. New York: Guilford Press.



- Pennebaker, J. (2004). *Writing to heal: A guided journal for recovering from trauma and emotional upheaval*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Press.
- Radloff, L. (1977). The CES-D scale: Self-report depression scale for research in the general population. *Applied Psychological Measurement, 1*(3), 385-401.
- Rainer, T. (1979). *The new diary: How to use a journal for self-guidance and expanded creativity*. Los Angeles: Tarchers.
- Rashid, T. (2005). *Positive Psychotherapy Inventory*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Seligman, M. (1990). *Learned optimism: How to change your mind and your life*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Seligman, M. (2002). *Authentic happiness*. New York: Free Press.
- Seligman, M. (2006). Afterword: Breaking the 65 percent barrier. In M. Csikszentmihalyi & I. Csikszentmihalyi (Eds.), *A life worth living* (pp. 230-236). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Seligman, M., & Peterson, C. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Seligman, M., Rashid, T., & Parks, A. (2006). Positive psychotherapy. *American Psychologist, 61*(8), 774-788.
- Seligman, M., Steen, T., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist, 60*(5), 410-421.

- Shapiro, S., Schwartz, G., & Santerre, C. (2002). Meditation and positive psychology. In C. Synder & S. Lopez (Eds.), *The handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 632-645). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sloane, D. (Executive Producer). (2008). *20/20: Happiness - How to find it, understand it and achieve it* [Television Broadcast]. New York: ABC.
- Synder, C. & Lopez, J. (2002). *The handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 700-714). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Waterman A. (1993). Two conceptions of happiness: Contrasts of personal expressiveness (eudaimonia) and hedonic enjoyment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64: 678–91.
- Williams, M., Teasdale, J., Segal, Z., & Kabat-Zinn, J. (2007). *The mindful way through depression*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Wilson, R. (Speaker). (2006). *T203 - Applying the science of happiness: Finding flow in your life and practice* (Audio CD Home Study Course Recording). Washington, DC: Psychotherapy Networker.
- Yalom, I. (2005). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy*. (5th Ed.) New York: Basic Books.
- Zimbardo, P., & Boyd, J. (2008). *The time paradox: The new psychology of time that will change your life*. New York: Free Press.