

## Lesson 3 - Healthy Emotions

One of the attractions of sports like skiing is the emotions that are experienced such as joy, contentment, pride, excitement and awe to name just a few. Such emotions are commonly labelled as 'positive' with emotions like fear, anxiety and dread being labelled as 'negative'. But are these labels really that helpful? Are all emotions not useful? After all we experience fear and anxiety for good reasons such as impending danger. In this lesson I will explore some of these emotions and look at why **all emotions** could be said to be **healthy** in the right dose and in the right context.



Why is positivity good for us?

Lets start, however, looking at 'positive' emotions and why having a sufficient dose of positivity is a good thing. According to Barbara Fredrickson (2011) there are many benefits to experiencing positive emotions such as, helping us to discover and develop new skills, establish ties with others, acquire new knowledge and new ways of being. In short, positivity helps us to build resources for the future.

Fredrickson (1998) developed the **broaden and build** theory of positive emotions which says, that experiencing positive emotions broadens an individual's momentary thought-action repertoire and in turn builds their



### TRY THIS

Take the **Positivity Self Test** to find out your positivity ratio. Go to [www.positivityratio.com](http://www.positivityratio.com)

physical, intellectual and social resources. The theory posits, that experiencing positive emotions feels good in the present moment and also increases the likelihood that one will feel good in the future. The general rule is that we should aim for a ratio that has more positive emotions than negative.

**“Positivity transforms us for the better. Positive emotions allow us to discover and build new skills, new ties, and new knowledge.”**

*(Fredrickson, 2011, p.24).*



In what way can specific emotions help us?

The feelings associated with different emotions vary and the emotions themselves all have specific benefits. For this lesson, I will cover joy, contentment, awe, pride and interest. And then, in the final section of this article, I will look at fear and anxiety and whether they are as negative as one might perceive.

**Joy.** This is very much an ‘in the moment’ experience when things are going well or even better than expected. In skiing, this could be making fresh tracks down an untouched field of powder snow. Or etching tracks onto a pristine piste of groomed corduroy first thing in the morning. Or perhaps skinning up to a peak well away from the crowds of the ski area. Joy makes us feel good while we are engaged in the activity and when we experience it we want more of it.

**Q.** *What is it that brings you joy?*

**Contentment.** This is more of a passive emotion and is sometimes called serenity. Imagine sitting in a bar at the bottom of the slopes, with friends, reflecting on a great day on the mountain and recounting those epic runs. Contentment is associated with feelings of a job well done and achievement. It is also about savouring the moment perhaps when we stop for a coffee, on the mountain, and take in the atmosphere and scenery. This is a pleasant low key emotion.

**Q.** *How often do you feel or experience contentment?*

**Awe.** When something makes us stop in our tracks and just look, in wonder and amazement - this is awe. One of the great attractions of mountain sports, like skiing, is the amazing scenery and sometimes we forget to just stop for a moment and take it all in. I often remind myself just how lucky I am to live and work in such a beautiful environment. Awe makes us feel part of something bigger. It is an emotion that transcends the self to an even higher level

of human development than self-actualisation as portrayed by Abraham Maslow in his later writings and thinking (Summary of Maslow on Self-Transcendence, 2017).

**Q.** *What makes you stop in your tracks and look in wonder?*



### TRY THIS

Videos can be a powerful way of eliciting pleasant emotions. Take a look at 'The Peak' <https://vimeo.com/53018096> to experience awe, wonder and serenity through time lapse photography.

**Pride.** This is an emotion that helps to develop self-esteem. Too much pride can lead to becoming “big headed” and the well known saying is that “pride often comes before a fall”. However, pride is important in building the self and it is good for us to know that we are the reason that good things have happened. For me, in skiing, some of my proudest moments have been gaining my ski instructor qualifications through the British Association of Snowsports Instructors (BASI) and then having the opportunity to train and assess instructors as they themselves work towards their qualification levels.

**Q.** *What makes you proud? What have you achieved that you feel good about?*

**Interest.** This is a really important emotion as it is what helps to keep us engaged in the world around us. Interest **leads** to other things: learning new skills, acquiring knowledge and experiencing flow. In my philosophy of Learn it, Love it, Live it, interest is a vital part of setting us along the path towards achieving great things.

**Q.** *When did you last feel an intense sense of interest?*

**Are emotions like fear and anxiety really negative?**

In skiing, we can experience fear and anxiety for many reasons: busy pistes with uncontrolled skiers and boarders, avalanches, injury to oneself or others, difficult snow conditions, steep slopes etc. However, research has shown (Lerner & Keltner, 2001) that people who are fearful tend to make pessimistic risk estimates and risk averse choices. Indeed, Raghunathan and Pham (1999) found that anxiety primes an implicit goal of uncertainty reduction. So, while I would not advocate that we should all be pessimists, there is a place for what Tim Lomas (2016) calls **strategic pessimism**.

Strategic pessimism is part of a process called ‘pro active coping’ or what many would refer to as risk management. Our cognitive perception of risk is based on our knowledge, and our personality (risk averse or risk taker). Each of us has an acceptable level of risk or ‘risk homeostasis’ and this not only varies from one person to another but can also change over time as we get older! No wonder we have sayings like “older and wiser”.

Therefore, a certain amount of pessimism is useful in keeping us safe in the mountains and ultimately leads to us making better decisions and having a more enjoyable time. That way we get to experience more of the pleasurable emotions like joy and excitement while sliding down the slopes and contentment as we sit in the bar, after skiing, and recount stories of our achievements that day.

Figure 1.1 below shows the process of managing fear and anxiety.

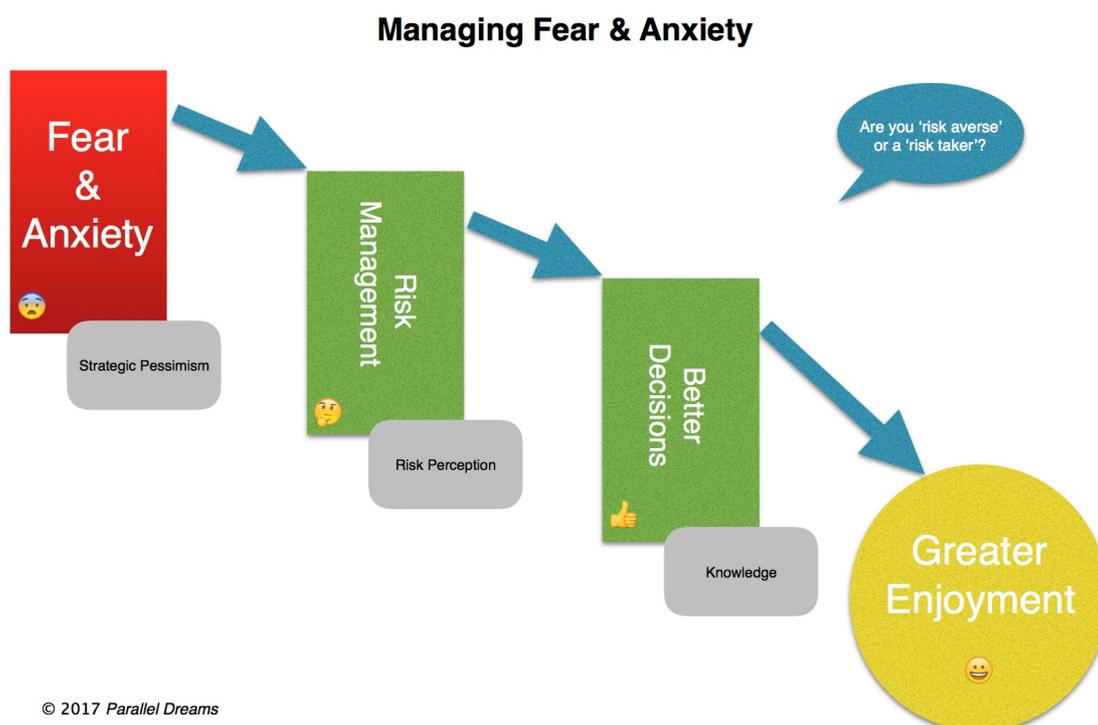


Figure 1.1

In conclusion, I would reaffirm what I stated at the beginning of this lesson, that all emotions are healthy in the right dose and the right context. As for fear and anxiety, I would not go as far as to say that they are positive, but they are certainly **useful** and it is only by experiencing a range of emotions that we can become better at managing ourselves and finding a balance that promotes plenty of memorable experiences.

Moreover, I believe that the use of the terms 'positive' and 'negative' are ambiguous (Wong, 2011) and that maybe we should abandon the idea of labelling them in this way and instead determine which emotions are healthiest to specific situations (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2015).

And finally, some sage advice from me, the strategic pessimist, to all those experienced skiers and instructors out there,

### **The Mountain doesn't know your an expert!**

#### Key Points

- Positivity helps us to discover and develop new skills and acquire new knowledge.
- Positive emotions broaden and build our momentary thought-action repertoire helping us to build resources for the future.

## *Six lessons to develop your skiing performance and enjoyment*

- Emotions like joy, contentment, awe, pride and interest all benefit us in specific ways that are useful to our development and future well-being.
- In the right context and amount, fear and anxiety are not negative emotions but are **useful** in ensuring that we stay safe in the mountains by helping us to make better decisions.

### References

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Wong, P. T. (2011). Positive Psychology 2.0: Towards a Balanced Interactive Model of the Good Life. *Canadian Psychology*, Vol. 52 (No. 2), 69-81.

### Web links

British Alpine Ski School Chamonix	<a href="http://www.basschamonix.com">www.basschamonix.com</a>
Learn it, Love it, Live it	<a href="http://www.optimalexperience.co.uk">www.optimalexperience.co.uk</a>
Positivity Ratio	<a href="http://www.positivityratio.com">www.positivityratio.com</a>
Ski Coaching & Mountain Life	<a href="http://www.paralleldreams.co.uk">www.paralleldreams.co.uk</a>

### About the author

Derek Tate holds a postgraduate diploma in Sports Coaching and has completed the first year of the MSc Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP). He holds the BASI International Ski Teacher Diploma and the IASI Alpine Level 4 Euro Ski Pro. He is a former trainer of ski instructors for the British Association of Snowsport Instructors (BASI) and current Head of Education for the Irish Association of Snowsports Instructors (IASI). He lives near Chamonix, in France where he is director of British Alpine Ski Schools (BASS) in Chamonix and Megeve.

Want to experience some healthy emotions this winter and learn how to manage fear and anxiety? Then book a lesson with Derek or Shona at BASS. To find out more go to <http://www.basschamonix.com/alacarteslessons>

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