

THRIVE

BREATHE TO THRIVE

Mindful Strategies for You and Your Child

A THRIVE Parenting Resource



The Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at the Pennsylvania State University developed the THRIVE Initiative with support from the U.S. Department of Defense's Office of Military Community and Family Policy.





THRIVE Initiative Overview

The THRIVE Initiative is a partnership between the Department of Defense’s Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State. This initiative is designed to empower parents as they nurture their children from birth until their children reach 18 years of age. The Initiative includes four age-specific program areas:

- Take Root! (0-3 years)
- Sprout! (3-5 years)
- Grow! (5-10 years), and
- Branch Out! (10-18 years)

THRIVE Initiative Program Areas			
<i>Take Root!</i>	<i>Sprout!</i>	<i>Grow!</i>	<i>Branch Out!</i>
Infants & Toddlers (Newborn - 3 years)	Preschool (3 - 5 years)	Grades K - 2 (5 - 8 years)	Grades 6 - 8 (10 - 14 years)
		Grades 3 - 5 (8 - 10 years)	Grades 9 - 12 (14 - 18 years)

Each THRIVE program guides parents as they learn and use parenting skills that are based on science, so they can encourage positive youth development and resiliency across their child’s lifespan. The Initiative focuses on three topic areas: 1) positive parenting practices, 2) parent and child stress management, and 3) child physical health promotion.



**For more information, contact:
 THRIVE@psu.edu or 1-877-382-9185
 www.THRIVE.psu.edu**

SECTION I: STRESS MANAGEMENT

Parents play a major role in promoting their children's well-being. While this certainly includes caring for them physically, it also involves caring for their mental and emotional needs. In fact, these aspects of wellbeing are considered to be inseparable and interactive¹. That is, physical health influences mental and emotional health and vice versa.

One can think of well-being as a resource, and, like all resources, it has the potential to run dry if not sufficiently replenished¹. Parents are one of the most significant sources of support for their children's overall wellbeing.



This resource guide provides practical tips and suggestions for parents on how to help develop their children's mental and emotional wellbeing.

- **Section I** is devoted to stress management.
- **Section II** focuses on being mindful in parenting interactions.
- **Section III** presents a series of exercises that parents can do with their children to help encourage mental and emotional wellbeing.

SECTION I: STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress is an unavoidable part of family life, and this is, perhaps, even more true today than ever before. Families experience stress that is related to a variety of situations or events that can be ordinary, such as getting all the children to their extracurricular activities on time or extreme, such as facing serious financial difficulties¹. Stress that is not appropriately managed can lead to physical, emotional, and mental health complications in adults and children^{1,2}.

For parents, stress can also interfere with enacting positive parenting behaviors, and it can be contagious. A 2010 survey conducted by the American Psychological Association³ found that a majority of the youth surveyed reported being stressed when their parents were stressed. Sometimes the best thing parents can do for their children is to take care of themselves.

There are a variety of useful and healthy ways to cope with stress. The table below lists some common coping strategies that people use.

When Feeling Stressed, Try These Healthy Ways to Cope!

- | | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------|
| • Go for a walk | • Do something fun | • Have a laugh | • Engage in a hobby |
| • Take a warm bath | • Pray or meditate | • Get some rest | • Talk to someone about your feelings |
| • Listen to music | | | |

SECTION I: STRESS MANAGEMENT

Relaxation Techniques

In addition to the strategies listed in the table on the previous page, people can also use relaxation techniques to calm down when experiencing stress. Relaxation techniques help to do the following⁴:

- Lower heart rate and reduce blood pressure;
- Slow breathing and alleviate tension in muscles;
- Decrease stress hormone levels;
- Diminish feelings of anger and frustration;
- Strengthen feelings of self-efficacy and self-confidence.

A variety of relaxation techniques exist, but, generally, they can be grouped into the three categories listed in Figure 1^{4,5,6,7}:

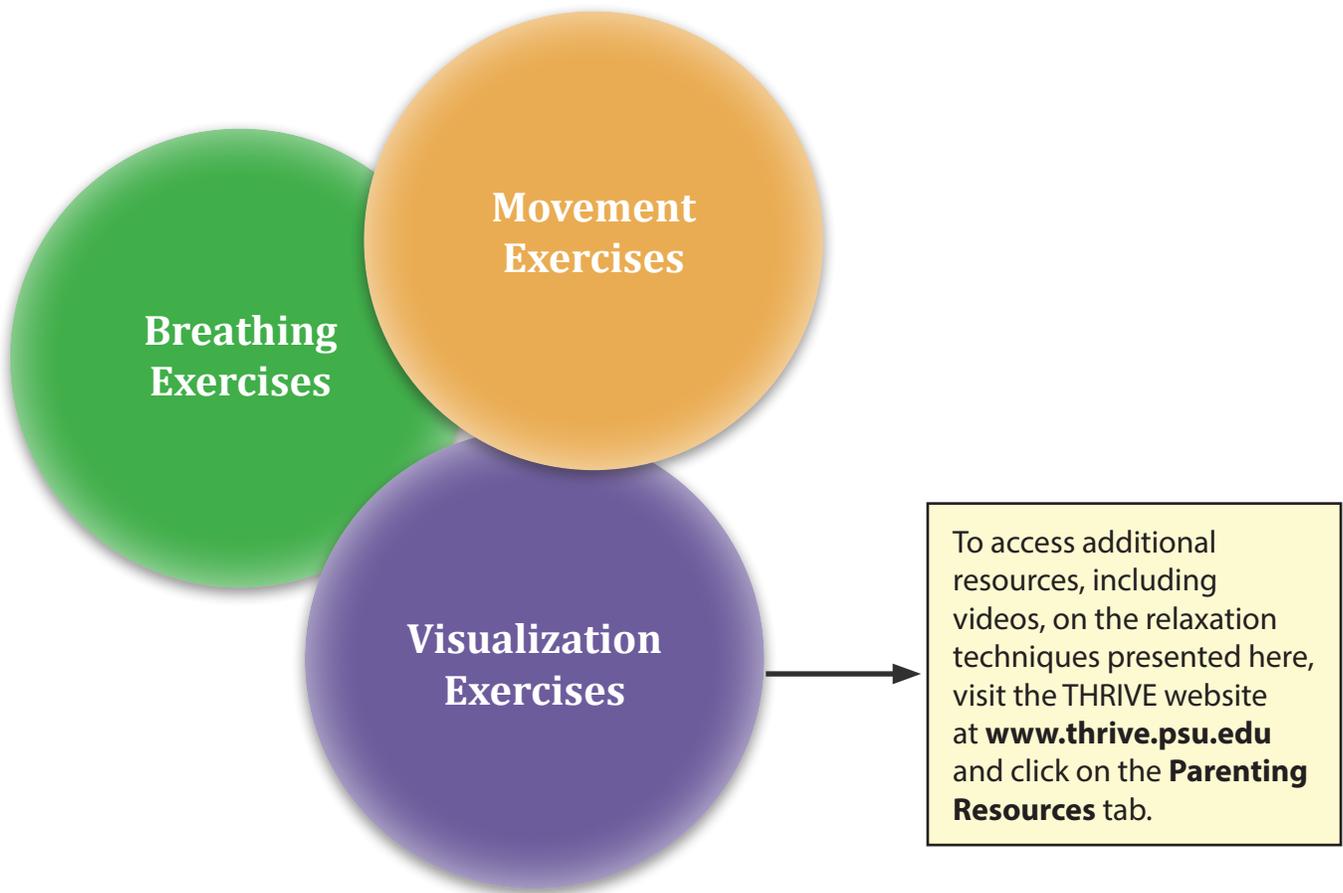


Figure 1: Relaxation Technique Categories

SECTION I: STRESS MANAGEMENT

Breathing Exercises

Breathing exercises draw attention to how the body takes in and releases oxygen. Often, people engage in shallow breathing, which restricts the diaphragm and results in important blood vessels not getting enough air. This can cause shortness of breath and feelings of anxiety⁸. Deep breathing, also known as controlled breathing, diaphragmatic breathing, abdominal breathing, or belly breathing, fills the lungs with air upon breathing in and empties the lungs of carbon dioxide upon breathing out, thereby, helping to calm the body.

To practice deep breathing, try the following steps:

1. Find a quiet and comfortable spot;
2. Sit tall with your hand rested on your lower abdomen;
3. Close your eyes or glance downward;
4. Take a deep breath in through your nose;
5. Feel your diaphragm fully inflate with air;
6. Slowly release the air through your nose or mouth; and
7. Repeat as many times as you feel are necessary.

Movement Exercises

Movement exercises focus attention on the body and help individuals become more attuned to their bodily sensations and the connection that exists between the mind and body⁸. Often, these exercises are practiced in conjunction with some type of deep breathing. Specific examples are listed in the table below and on the next page.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

The objective of progressive muscle relaxation is to tighten and relax every muscle group in the body in a sequential order. Try the following steps:

1. Sit tall and comfortably place your hands on your lap;
2. Close your eyes or glance downward;
3. Tense the muscles in your feet for 5 seconds and then relax for 30 seconds;
4. Work your way up to your head tensing your muscles for 5 seconds and relaxing for 30 seconds;
5. Work your way from your head back to your feet; and
6. Repeat as many times as you feel are necessary.

SECTION I: STRESS MANAGEMENT

Yoga

** Like with any exercise program, you should consult your doctor prior to beginning. Also, the best way to avoid injuries and benefit the most from yoga is to do it with an experienced instructor.*

Yoga is an activity that combines body movements with deep breathing and meditation. In addition to its calming effects, yoga also provides physical benefits, such as enhanced balance, flexibility, strength, and stamina⁹. If you are interested in trying yoga, here are a few basic poses^{10,11}:

1. Mountain Pose

- Stand up as straight as you can with your legs together (or slightly parted) and your hands at your side.
- Relax your shoulders and distribute your weight evenly throughout your body.
- As you breathe in deeply, raise your arms out to the side until your hands are above your head with palms facing each other.
- Stretch your fingertips up toward the sky.



2. Seated twist with leg bent

- Sit up straight with your legs stretched out in front of you.
- Bend your left leg so that your left foot is next to your right knee.
- Bend your right arm so that your right elbow is against your left leg.
- Pushing against your leg, try to touch your right leg near the knee.
- Place your left hand on the floor behind you for support.
- Twist your backbone to the left and turn your head as you twist.



3. Upward facing dog

- Lie face down on the floor using your forearms and feet to prop your body up off the floor.
- Bend your arms upward until they are straight while also lowering your pelvis and thighs toward the ground.
- Arch your back and look up making sure to keep your arms and legs straight.
- Do not let your knees touch the ground.
- Place the tops of your feet on the ground.



Rhythmic Exercise

**These types of exercises can be very effective at reducing stress.*

When engaging in these exercises, focus your attention on your movements and breathing. You should check with your doctor before starting any rhythmic exercise program.

Rhythmic exercise includes activities like the following⁸:
Running, Walking, Swimming, or Cycling.

SECTION I: STRESS MANAGEMENT

Visualization Exercises

Visualization exercises, known as guided imagery, direct one's mind away from stressful thoughts by shifting one's focus to positive, calming circumstances; experiences; or aspirations. These exercises work well when done in a quiet location and when multiple senses (i.e., sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste) are used. The example included in the table below is one way to engage in visualization.

Visualization Example
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Imagine you are hiking in the woods;2. See the sun setting behind the mountains in the distance;3. Listen to the sound of the wildlife around you;4. Feel the cool breeze against your skin;5. Savor the smell of the evergreen trees around you; and6. Enjoy the refreshing taste of cold water.

Visualization exercises can also help children cope!

Try these relaxation techniques with your child!

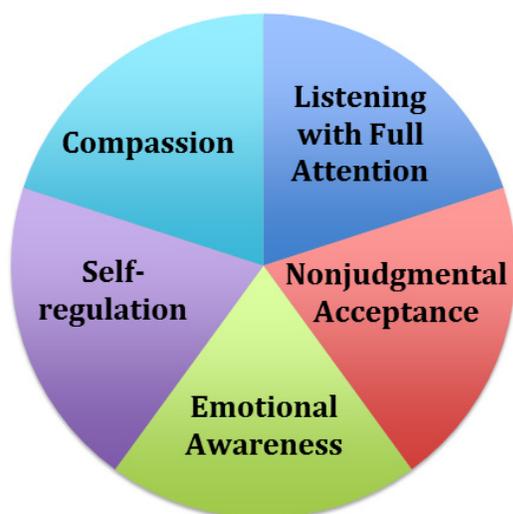
Movement exercises will need to be modified so that they are appropriate and safe for children, and visualization exercises will need to be modified so that they are relevant and engaging. The table below lists two examples of visualization exercises that parents can try with their children.

Instant Vacation ¹²
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Help your children identify their favorite family vacation spot;2. Have them close their eyes and practice deep breathing;3. Have them describe to you what they see, hear, feel, smell, and taste;4. Guide their thoughts and images as necessary to help them stay focused and calm.
Breathing Smiles ¹³
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Have your children sit or lie in a comfortable position;2. Work with them to practice deep breathing for a minute or two;3. Transition into the visualization exercise by having them imagine that the next breath they breathe in is in the shape of a smile;4. Instruct them to send the smile up to their head and to feel their whole head smiling;5. Continue to do this for the neck, shoulders, arms, back, chest, stomach, and legs.

SECTION II: MINDFUL PARENTING

Mindfulness is intentionally focusing on and being aware of experiences in the present in a nonjudgmental fashion¹⁴. Being mindful in parenting is one way that one can enrich his or her relationship with his or her children and promote their wellbeing. Mindfulness can help one be less stressed and emotionally reactive, which allows one to interact more lovingly with his or her children.

Mindful parenting encompasses 5 elements¹⁵ as shown in Figure 2:



Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM):

LKM¹⁶ is one way we can enhance our feelings of compassion for our self and our child. Try the following:

1. Sit comfortably in a quiet and peaceful place with your eyes closed and use controlled breathing;
2. Focus your attention on your child and the love you have for him or her;
3. Extend this feeling of love to yourself.

Figure 2: Elements of Mindful Parenting

Listening with Full Attention

This involves giving complete attention to what a child is saying and doing. Pay attention to the child's words, vocal tone, body language, and facial expressions. Doing this can help one interpret his or her child's messages and identify the child's needs more accurately.

Nonjudgmental Acceptance

This entails openly accepting one's own and one's child's attributes, abilities, attitudes, and actions. Using this approach can help one achieve a more realistic understanding of oneself, one's child, and one's relationship with one's child because one can abandon preconceptions. Nonjudgmental acceptance, however, does not mean lowering standards for or excusing misbehavior in children. Rather, parents who practice this aspect of mindfulness still provide their child with clear and developmentally appropriate rules and expectations, but they do so without judgment and with greater compassion.

SECTION II: MINDFUL PARENTING

Emotional Awareness

This involves deliberately focusing attention on one's own one's child's emotions, both positive and negative. Emotions are a natural part of parent-child interactions, and, when parents experience strong emotions, they have a tendency to engage in parenting that is reactive. Maintaining emotional awareness buffers parents from reactive parenting, and this allows parents to interact thoughtfully with their child.

Self-regulation

This entails exercising self-control over words and actions when interacting with children. Practicing self-control allows one to remain calm, cool, and collected, so one can engage in parenting behaviors that bring out the best in the child.

Compassion

This involves displaying empathy and concern for oneself and one's child. Children can face many challenges as they mature, and parents should be a valuable source of comfort and support for them during trying times. Additionally, parents should not be too critical of their parenting efforts. Parents should set high standards for themselves, but should also forgive themselves when certain goals are not attained.

SECTION II: MINDFUL PARENTING

Mindful parenting can be extremely beneficial to the parent-child relationship during challenging and stressful situations, like being pressed for time or disciplining, as it can help parents keep their emotions in check and minds focused on the present. Try the following recommendations¹⁷ listed in Figure 3, when faced with challenging or stressful parenting situations:



Figure 3: Mindful Recommendations for Challenging Moments

Pause & Breathe: Pause and focus on breathing. As discussed earlier, breathing is a very effective way of calming the body and refocusing thoughts and attention.

Remember to Show Love & Support: In the moment when emotions begin to flare, it can be challenging to remember to show love and support. Taking a moment to pause and breathe, however, could provide one with an opportunity to think about how to respond to the demands of the current situation in an appropriately loving and supportive fashion. For example, if you are running late to an appointment and your child has not gotten her shoes on yet, pause what you are doing and breathe. As you are breathing, think about how you can resolve the shoe issue with your child lovingly.

Plan Ahead for Next Time: After the challenging situation has passed, it is a good idea to devote a bit of time to thinking about how that situation could be avoided or improved in the future. Go back to the shoe example. Perhaps the problem was that the child did not remember where her shoes were. Initiate a new routine that involves everyone putting their shoes in the same spot every night. Sometimes planning ahead makes a big difference.

Give Yourself a Break: No parent is perfect. Everyone is human, and everyone makes mistakes. Mistakes can provide opportunities for parents to learn, improve, and help their children understand that no one is perfect. Mistakes also provide opportunities for parents to show their children positive ways to correct them. Acknowledge mistakes and endeavor to correct them in the future.

SECTION III: EXERCISES TO PROMOTE MENTAL & EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Over the last several decades, psychologists have focused their attention on understanding how to enhance individuals' mental and emotional well-being through the promotion of positive attitudes and behaviors¹⁸. This emphasis reflects the recognition that improving people's lives, especially the lives of children, has to involve recognizing, nurturing, and reinforcing positive emotions, qualities, and actions¹⁹. A variety of exercises have been developed to boost mental and emotional well-being, and the accumulating evidence suggests that these exercises can be effective at increasing mental and emotional well-being and decreasing depressive symptoms^{12, 20}. These initial research results are encouraging as enhanced well-being can help adults and children adapt more positively to life's opportunities and challenges¹.

The following pages contain a series of exercises that parents can complete with their children to nurture their own and their children's well-being.

SECTION III: EXERCISES TO PROMOTE MENTAL & EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Exercise One: Signature Strengths

Benefits: Research²¹ has shown that this exercise can lead to greater feelings of happiness and reduced feelings of depression.

Instructions: For this activity, help your child identify five traits that best characterize him or her. Examples of traits you may come up with include the following: kind, loving, friendly, forgiving, and grateful. After the traits have been identified, brainstorm ways that you and your child could promote those strengths daily for at least a week. Remember to avoid personal attributes and focus on character qualities you wish to encourage!

My strengths include the following:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



I will put these strengths into practice this week by doing the following:

SECTION III: EXERCISES TO PROMOTE MENTAL & EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Exercise Two: Counting Your Blessings

Benefits: Research evidence^{22,23} suggests that doing this exercise daily for a period of at least 10 to 14 days can contribute to greater optimism, positivity, and satisfaction with life and less negativity.

Instructions: For this activity, help your child identify five experiences, big or small, that occurred to him or her since yesterday for which he or she is grateful or thankful. Have your child write them down on the lines provided below.

I am grateful for the following:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



SECTION III: EXERCISES TO PROMOTE MENTAL & EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Exercise Three: Three Good Things

Benefits: Research²¹ on this exercise has found that doing it daily for one week can result in enhanced feelings of happiness and lessened feelings of depression. For the participants in the study, these effects were found to last for at least six months.

Instructions: In this activity, you will help your child identify three good occurrences that happened to him or her throughout the day. As you identify each good item, help your child go one step further by figuring out why that good experience happened.

Three things that went well today include the following:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

These things went well because of the following:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



SECTION III: EXERCISES TO PROMOTE MENTAL & EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Exercise Four: Acts of Kindness

Benefits: Research evidence^{24,25} suggests that performing kind acts, big or small, can result in greater positivity and happiness and increases in being liked by peers. Increases in social acceptance can be very important for children because this tends to be related to positive academic and social functioning²⁵.

Instructions: For this activity, help your child identify three kind acts that he or she can perform throughout the week. These acts can be big or small, and they can be for anyone. To get the most out of this activity, try to do it for several weeks in a row.

Three kind things I can do this week include the following:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

- ¹ Murphey, D., Stratford, B., Gooze, R., Bringewatt, E., Cooper, P. M., Carney, R., & Rojas, A. (2014). *Are the children well? A model and recommendations for promoting the mental wellness of the nation's young people*. Retrieved from http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/issue_briefs/2014/rwjf414424
- ² Center on the Developing Child. (2014). *Key concepts: Toxic stress*. Retrieved from http://developingchild.harvard.edu/key_concepts/toxic_stress_response/
- ³ American Psychological Association. (2014). *Managing stress for a healthy family*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/managing-stress.aspx>
- ⁴ Mayo Clinic Staff. (2014). *Relaxation techniques: Try these steps to reduce stress*. Retrieved from <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/stress-management/in-depth/relaxation-technique/art-20045368?pg=1>
- ⁵ The Harvard Medical School. (2006). *Relaxation techniques: Breath control helps to quell errant stress response*. Retrieved from <http://www.health.harvard.edu/fhg/updates/update1006a.shtml>
- ⁶ National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. (2013). *Relaxation techniques for health: An introduction*. Retrieved from <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/stress/relaxation.htm>
- ⁷ Robinson, L., Segal, R., Segal, J., & Smith, M. (2014). *Relaxation techniques for stress relief: Find the relaxation exercises that work for you*. Retrieved from http://www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_relief_meditation_yoga_relaxation.htm
- ⁸ Harvard Medical School. (2009). *Take a deep breath*. Retrieved from http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletters/Harvard_Mental_Health_Letter/2009/May/Take-a-deep-breath
- ⁹ KidsHealth. (2012). *Yoga*. Retrieved from http://kidshealth.org/teen/food_fitness/exercise/yoga.html#
- ¹⁰ Poses. (2014). In *Yoga*. Retrieved from <https://yoga.com/poses?level=beginner&category=standing>
- ¹¹ Editors of Fitness Magazine. (2014). *Yoga poses for beginners*. *Fitness Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.fitnessmagazine.com/workout/yoga/poses/beginner-yoga-poses/>
- ¹² Ginsburg, K. R., & Jablo, M. M. (2011). *Building resilience in children and teens: Giving kids roots and wings* (2nd ed.). Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics.
- ¹³ Rancour, P. (n.d.). *Relaxation for children*. Retrieved from http://medicalcenter.osu.edu/patientcare/healthcare_services/integrative_medicine/clinical-services/Pages/Guided-Imagery-Practices.aspx
- ¹⁴ Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 10*, 144–156.
- ¹⁵ Duncan, L. G., Coatsworth, J. D., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). A model of mindful parenting: Implications for parent-child relationships and prevention research. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 12*, 255–270.
- ¹⁶ Fredrickson, B. L., Cohn, M. A., Coffey, K. A., Pek, J., & Finkel, S. M. (2008). Open hearts build lives: Positive emotions, induced through loving-kindness meditation, build consequential personal resources. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 95*, 1045–1062.
- ¹⁷ Sutie, J. (2014). *Mindful discipline for kids*. Retrieved from http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/mindful_discipline_shauna_shapiro
- ¹⁸ Bolier, L., Haverman, M., Westerhof, G. J., Riper, H., Smit, F., & Bohlmeijer, E. (2013). Positive psychology interventions: A meta-analysis of randomized controlled studies. *BMC Public Health, 13*, 119–138.
- ¹⁹ Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist, 55*, 5–14.
- ²⁰ Sin, N. L., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2009). Enhancing well-being and alleviating depressive symptoms with positive psychology interventions: A practice-friendly meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 65*, 467–487.
- ²¹ Seligman, M. E., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist, 60*, 410–421.
- ²² Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2003). Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*, 377–389.
- ²³ Froh, J. J., Sefick, W. J., & Emmons, R. A. (2008). Counting blessings in early adolescents: An experimental study of gratitude and subjective well-being. *Journal of School Psychology, 46*, 213–233.
- ²⁴ Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K. M., & Schkade, D. (2005). Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change. *Review of General Psychology, 9*, 111–131.
- ²⁵ Layous, K., Nelson, S. K., Oberle, E., Schonert-Reichl, K. A., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2012). Kindness counts: Prompting prosocial behavior in preadolescents boosts peer acceptance and well-being. *PLOS ONE, 7*(12), e51380.



**For more information, contact:
THRIVE@psu.edu or 1-877-382-9185**

**Access additional resources online:
www.THRIVE.psu.edu**