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## CHAPTER

# 1

## Boosting Positive Energy

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“I have so many mixed emotions about teaching. I enjoy aspects of my job but also find it hard to maintain my joy and energy throughout the day.”

—Anonymous

**W**hen I started out my career in education, I was pretty darn excited about everything I’d learned in graduate school. I was armed with best practices! I was young! I was determined! I had positive energy! TGIM, people! I could have pushed over a small SUV with the superhuman strength I felt inside to Change. The. MF. World.

I vividly remember sitting in staff meetings, pencil poised above my notepad, ready to learn!

And I also remember noticing grouchy people, pencils down, ready to complain. What the heck was wrong with them?

Fast forward 10 years, and oh snap . . . *I* was the grouch. Maybe not on the outside to a casual observer, but on the inside. I had

grown cynical. Slowly, I had begun drowning in the quicksand of negativity, anxious about the high expectations I could never meet, and demoralized at the grossly understaffed and under-resourced system I worked in. And each day, more and more tasks and roles were being added to my already full plate. Sound familiar?

(Oh! And if that doesn't sound familiar because you're brand new to the profession – don't freak out! You are in the lucky position to stop burnout before it even takes hold!)

Let's do a quick reflection to see how full your tank is.



On a scale of 1-10 with one being “I want to quit” and 10 being “TGIM! (Thank Goodness it's Monday!),” I am at a \_\_\_\_\_ with my positive energy level.

## Why Filling Your Tank Is Essential

When you think of someone who is burned out, you might conjure up an image of someone just “phoning it in” and not caring about their job. That's not what burnout for educators and care professionals usually looks like. It often looks like *running on empty in overdrive*.

Passion can often lead to burnout.<sup>1</sup> Educators are the perfect example of passion-driven helping professionals, and thus they are more susceptible to burnout because they are surrounded by pressure to love the job. I experienced this firsthand, as a school psychologist bringing home my work every night and weekend because I cared so much. I was running on the fumes of my bigger why – my love for the students I served.<sup>2</sup> Chances are, you have done the same.

I could go into all the dangers of running on fumes in overdrive, and all the dangers of chronic stress. But chances are, you already know that high levels of stress or chronic stress is related

to almost any negative outcome you can think of. If you want to freak yourself out, check out APA's 2023 Stress in America report, which paints a vivid picture of how stress is more than just an emotional burden: it's a physical one, too. Stress, often seen as a mental and emotional challenge, manifests physically, leading to conditions like heart disease and weakened immune systems. Particularly striking is the hidden toll of stress on those who appear resilient; they can show accelerated aging at the cellular level, a somber reminder that appearances can be deceiving, and that resilience can have a cost. This revelation underscores the need for more supportive environments in our schools, where educators' successes aren't at the expense of their own health.

The thing is, you can't typically control the stressors – high class sizes, high demands, increasing student needs – but you *can* control your mindset and reaction to the stressors.

I'm not saying that burnout is some sort of personal self-care fail. I'm not going to spout "cruel optimism" where we put the burden of change on the individual in a system where the stress cards are stacked against them. This book is about practical optimism. We absolutely need to work on upstream workplace issues like reducing class size, increasing mental health and learning supports, and giving educators more autonomy over bureaucracy. We also need to acknowledge that there are larger forces at work in our society that add stress upon stress, such as racism, sexism, ableism, and policy choices that adversely impact marginalized groups in our schools. But until we sort all those complex upstream challenges, what can we do on Monday? What is the fuel for a happy educator in challenging circumstances? Let's geek out on that.

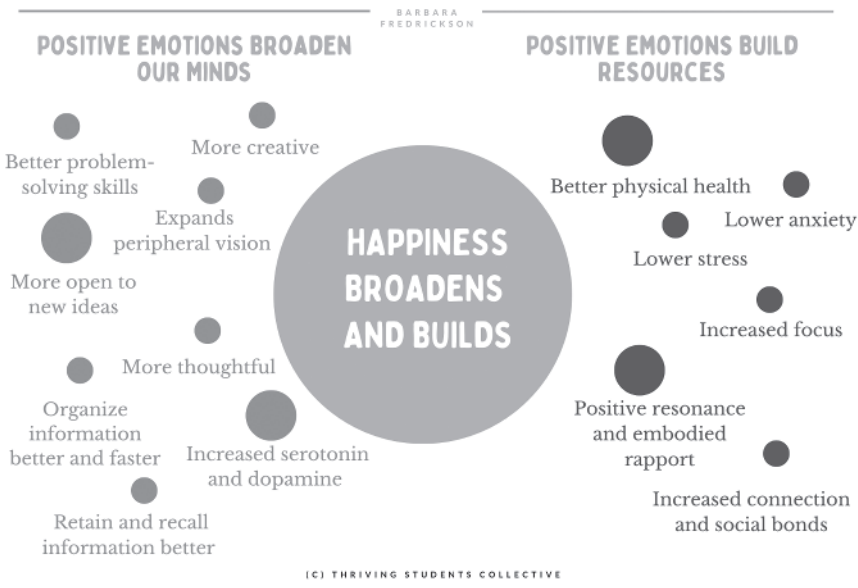
Before we launch into the happiness fuel we need to thrive as educators, let's pause for a moment about the goal itself, of boosting positive emotions. Barbara Frederickson's research on happiness reveals that positive emotions are not just pleasant but necessary to be a functioning human! Engaging in activities that make us happy doesn't only improve our mood; it also enhances

our creativity, problem-solving skills, and even our physical health. Happiness is not a “nice to have,” it is a “need to have” for educators to thrive. Positive emotions both broaden and build our cognitive and emotional resources.<sup>3</sup>

Just look at Figure 1.1, showing all the correlates of happiness!

While we can all agree happiness is a worthy goal in and of itself, there are also many reasons to prioritize happiness as educators, as it also improves our craft and student outcomes. The double-edged sword of helping professionals is that we tend to be high achievers (great!) but we can also be a self-critical bunch (not so great). When a lesson bombs, an angry parent shows up with harsh words, or when a hard-to-reach student is giving us a hard time again, we often take it to heart.

With the barrage of daily stressors and “best-laid-plans short-falls,” we often give our weaknesses and limitations more attention than our strengths. But research suggests that thinking about personal strengths can increase our happiness and reduce depression.<sup>4</sup>



**FIGURE 1.1** Broaden and Build Theory

While we shouldn't ignore our shortcomings, reflecting on our strengths can help remind us of our positive attributes, and this can build our confidence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem – and, in turn, increase happiness.

Research shows that using your strengths intentionally at work leads to greater overall satisfaction and makes mundane or frustrating tasks feel less burdensome.<sup>5</sup>

A recent study shows that people who have the opportunity to use their strengths are:<sup>6</sup>

- 7.8% more productive
- 6x as likely to strongly agree that they have the chance to do what they do best every day
- 6x more likely to be engaged at work

So how can we focus on our strengths? In one study, participants tried using a personal strength each day for one week. Compared with those who didn't try to use a strength – instead they wrote about their memories every day for a week – those who identified and used their strengths reported an increase in happiness and a decrease in symptoms of depression immediately after the one-week experiment, and those changes persisted six months later.<sup>7</sup>

## **Bridging the Research to Your Reality**

Now the fun part! Let's translate that research into reality. What practical things can you do, during your day, to shift your lens from focusing on what's wrong to what's strong?

### **Know Your Strengths**

Step one is knowing your strengths. When I present across the country and ask a room of educators what their strengths are, I am

frequently met with blank stares. What typically follows is one reluctant participant raises their hand and offers, almost as if a question “I’m a good listener?” Another tentatively adds, “I am good at helping?” Even when I give teachers permission to brag a little, very few people feel comfortable sharing their strengths. Some have “strength blindness” altogether, where they’ve never really even thought to stop and think about what they’re good at. Sometimes educators are so focused on their students’ strengths, they forget to look at their own! If you took the Thrive-o-gram, now you’re one of the small percentage of adults who know and can articulate their strengths! Now is a great time to pull it out as a reference so you can have your strengths at the forefront of your mind as you read this book. And if you haven’t taken it yet, this is an optimal time to do that!

**Take the assessment to see what's your Thrive-o-gram type!**

#thriveogram



FIND OUT YOUR TYPE! [THRIVINGSTUDENTS.COM/THRIVEOGRAM](http://THRIVINGSTUDENTS.COM/THRIVEOGRAM)

## Recognizing Flow in the Classroom

Have you ever felt so immersed in an activity that time seemed to vanish? This state, known as “flow,” is not just a fleeting joy but a critical psychological state where you’re at your most engaged and productive. Reflect on when you experience flow during your school day – those moments when joy in teaching makes time fly.



I am in flow when \_\_\_\_\_

Chances are, in these moments, you are using your strengths. This is your positive energy fuel!

## Micromovements Toward Recharging

The key to sustainable energy isn't found in grand gestures and big chunks of time to rest, but in the small, consistent efforts to recharge. Like a car, it's easier to refuel a little at a time rather than stressing out when you're running on fumes and trying to find a bunch of time to refuel. Small, micromovements toward recharging will be far more effective than the elusive “big break.”

Why is this important? Let me tell you a little tale about big stress vs. “microstressors.”

Imagine you go to school tomorrow, and there's a huge altercation in your classroom. A child screams at you, throws his desk over, and you call the office for help and no one comes. You have to evacuate your whole classroom as the child is a danger to himself and others. When the situation finally calms down, you go on with your day, grateful no one was hurt. But then, at the end of

the day, the child's parent comes in and yells at you for not being able to manage your classroom. Now that's a big stressful day!

Chances are, after a day like this, you'll go home and think of ways you can de-stress, whether it's having a big ol' cry on a friend's shoulder, working out, watching a distractingly funny show, or just taking the world's longest bubble bath. Maybe you even take a mental health day the next day to reset your nervous system. Big stress often results in self-care activation. You know you need to take care of yourself because the stress was undeniable.

Now, imagine another day, in which you have to work right until the bell rings because there was unexpected traffic. You don't have time to even set down your bag before kids come in your classroom. In your haste to get organized, you spill coffee on your favorite shirt. Throughout the day, there are a few annoyances, but nothing huge. The copier jams. You get a weird side eye from a colleague at lunch when you're talking about a lesson, but she doesn't say anything. You stub your toe at yard duty. And you get a curt email from a parent.

Chances are, after a day like this, you don't have a big ol' cry or activate some self-care mechanism. After all, this is par for the course. Of course there are tiny annoying things in your day. The thing is, your body accumulates all these "microstresses" just as it does a big stress. And unless you complete the stress cycle of activating self-care, it stays with you – in the back of your mind, and in your body, and it all adds up. As Cross & Dillon note in their article, "The Hidden Toll of Microstress," microstresses are so insidious because they slip past our defenses.<sup>8</sup> If you barely register the negativity in the moment, your normal stress response doesn't fire and the stress accrues.

And that, my friend, is why you must refuel and recharge a little every single day, whether you had one big stress or a bunch of microstressors!

### Positive Priming – Setting the Stage for Success

Raise your hand if you like to be right! I personally love being right, who doesn't?!? While we don't always shout it like the character in the old Smurfs cartoon, Brainy Smurf, with his cry of "I was right!" we do get a little satisfaction, don't we? And guess what? Our brains love to be right, too. Our brains adore patterns, and when we prime ourselves with positivity, we are more likely to continue recognizing positive aspects in our lives. Our brains are constantly scanning for confirmation of our beliefs. If you believe you are underappreciated and nothing you do is right, the inner Brainy Smurf in your brain is going to lock in on those moments and declare (probably in an annoying voice), "Ha! I was right!" The fancy term for it is priming. Our beliefs prime our brains to scan for evidence that we are right.

Good news is that priming works for positivity, too. By visualizing positive outcomes and acknowledging our strengths, we set ourselves up for success, reducing stress and fostering resilience. It's like playing a strengths-based movie in your mind with a positive outcome. Have a tricky parent meeting coming up? Instead of playing out all the things that could go wrong and how bad it's going to be, harness your strengths. Love learning? Imagine all you will learn about diffusing parents. Is creativity your strength? Get creative about ways to connect with the family.

### Get Energy from Your Students

One of the sources of energy is the kids themselves! For sure, they can also drain your energy, but that typically happens if you are giving, giving, giving all day. If you're doing all the talking, redirecting, organizing, and managing in the classroom, it can be exhausting. But what if you flipped the script and fed off their buzzing energy? What if you helped them channel their strengths into co-creating a vibrant classroom environment together?

One way to do this is to provide them with autonomy, ownership, and opportunities to tap into *their* strengths. Do you have a kid who is great at tech? She can have the classroom “job” of tech support for setting up your slides. One of your students excels at art? Ask for help with drawing the parts of a cell on the board. Are your out-of-the box and creative students complaining something is “boring?” Set up an area of the classroom where they can go to quietly work on the topic in a novel way. Maybe you’re studying Ancient Rome, and they could create a model of the Coliseum, or they could research a famous Roman and imagine what their social media profile would look like today. Turn that creative energy into engaged learning!

Another way to get energy from your students is to build in time to bond and have fun together. Take 10 minutes at the beginning of every class and do something fun. It can be anything! Show them a funny music video from when you were a kid and ask them what they think. Have a fun question of the day as you take attendance. Welcome them in the class with a high-five or special greeting. Anything that would be fun for you and your students builds connection. And connection fuels engagement. So rather than pouring everything you have into your students and then having to take a break from them to refuel, you can fill up each other’s positive energy tanks with fun rituals, having them use their strengths, and building community together.

### Blend Work with Passion

One of the genius strategies from Angela Watson, my co-creator of *How to Reverse Educator Burnout*, is to make the conscious distinction between work-work and hobby work.

Long gone are the days of the 1950s “punch clock” when your work hours ended when you punched a timecard, went home, and you were done with work until you showed up the

next day to punch in. Now, our work follows us home, in the form of unanswered emails, to-dos we didn't get to, and a culture of "you are always on the job."

Not all work you bring home is the same. Some tasks you bring home at the end of the day are like sipping a warm cup of tea on a rainy day – enjoyable and comforting. Others? More like trudging through a downpour without an umbrella. Recognizing this difference is key to managing your energy and enthusiasm.

Now, let's talk about those energizing activities you do in your downtime. Imagine cozying up on a weekend evening, diving into the online world of lesson planning, or crafting teaching resources while your favorite show plays in the background. These tasks are fun and might not feel like work. They're done out of pure passion, with no looming deadlines. It's not an every-night affair, but when it happens, it's fun, right? There's no need to set boundaries on these moments of inspiration. Let them be a free-flowing source of joy, a wellspring of ideas that makes you look forward to your time in the classroom.

But then there's the obligatory work – the stuff that feels like a chore. We've all been there: dragging home those papers to grade, that report to write, or forms to complete, wishing we could just leave them at school. It's a whole different ballgame from those relaxing Pinterest binges. That's why it's crucial to draw a line in the sand. Allocate a specific chunk of time and self-imposed boundaries for these must-dos.

## **Micro-Habits to Use Your Thrive-O-Gram Strengths**

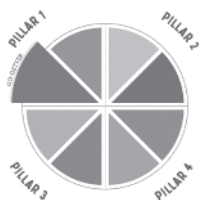
To tap into your strengths, we are going to use the micro-habit of affirmations. Habit formation research shows that when we pair a new habit with a well-established one, we are more likely to do

the new habit. Therefore, pairing affirmations with automatic activities, such as drinking a morning cup of coffee, brushing teeth, or buckling a seatbelt on the way to work, can reinforce our strengths. Or maybe you change your password to something that includes your strength so you are constantly reminded of it! As we learned in the introduction, our brains love to be “right.”

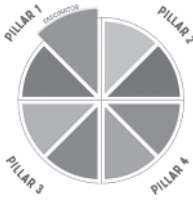
If we tell ourselves each morning, or when we type our password, that we are strong and capable, our brains will scan our day for confirmation of this to be “right.” It’s like putting on strengths-colored glasses; we will start to prime ourselves for opportunities in the day to make it happen.

Here’s a fun way to remember this. Ever see the old *Saturday Night Live* sketch with “Stuart Smalley?” If not, it’s worth a quick search to watch an old clip. In the bit, he gets people like Michael Jordan to look in the mirror and tell themselves positive affirmations. The gag is you *know* that these folks tell themselves this already, and that this positive mindset is part of their success. It’s quite funny to watch superstars repeat: “I’m good enough, smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!” Now, it’s your turn!

Keep in mind, that the following suggestions are based on your Thrive-o-gram strengths profile, but we often have multiple strengths. You can look at only your profile if you want to focus on one idea, or you can choose from any of the suggestions that resonate with you. The best strategy is the one that you try that works for you!



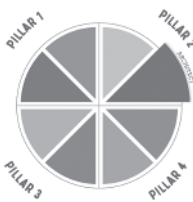
**Go-Getter:** Challenge yourself to 30 days of self-affirmations and track it on your planner. At the beginning of each day, when creating your to-do list, write down your affirmation before crushing that to-do list!



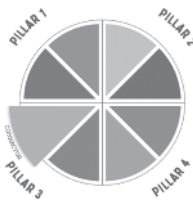
**Fascinator:** Research strengths-based assessments for yourself and your students. For example, check out Via Character strengths or Clifton-Strengths finder. Fascinate yourself with your strengths and how to bring them out in others.



**Creator:** In addition to repeating your own strengths, consider creating an activity for students to do the same. Create an affirmation mirror where students enter the class and share their strength. Have your students make a strengths card or word art on their desks to reference daily. Get creative!



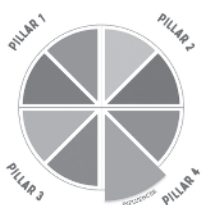
**Architect:** Is there a systems-wide affirmation intervention you can do with your colleagues and/or students? Think about ways you can integrate strengths into the vision of your school culture. A “Know Your Strengths” awareness campaign? Strengths week? Staff meeting affirmation rituals? Think big, architect!



**Connector:** Buddy up with a favorite colleague and share your strengths with one another. Using your strengths, create a plan to build an affirmation ritual in your day (for you and your students!). Teamwork makes the dream work, right?



**Helper:** One of your core strengths is kindness, so can you come up with a way to be kind to yourself with ritualizing a positive self-affirmation each day? Since you love to help too, think of a way you can encourage your students to use positive and kind self-talk in the classroom. Modeling kindness is a great way to help others!



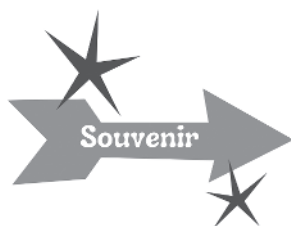
**Influencer:** When you look in the mirror, tell yourself you're good enough, smart enough, and, doggone it, you are a leader! Leaders set a good example, so practice what you preach and bring strength-based affirmations into your classroom and model it for the students.



**Nurturer:** You'll probably love self-affirmations, since one of your core strengths is self-awareness! Pick a daily ritual that reminds you of this strength, such as journaling or creating a visual reminder of your positive affirmation.

## Your Thriving Road Map

As we conclude this first leg on our Thriving Journey, remember that your journey to “Thrive Town” is not just about maintaining a full tank; it's about having a surplus of strengths-based fuel to give abundantly and in the long haul without depletion. Being an educator requires daily refueling, and your strengths are the greatest source of fuel there is. No more running on empty in overdrive!



Write down one micro-habit strategy from this chapter that you want to take with you as a souvenir for yourself.

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Write down one micro-habit strategy from this chapter that you want to take with you as a souvenir to use at your school or with your students.

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### Discussion Questions:

- 1. Mixed Emotions in Teaching:** The text begins with an educator expressing mixed emotions about their job, enjoying aspects of it but also struggling to maintain joy and energy. How do you relate to these feelings, and what strategies do you use to balance the joys and challenges of teaching?
- 2. Preventing Burnout:** The author discusses the susceptibility of passionate educators to burnout due to the nature of their job and societal pressures. What beliefs do you hold that may be unintentionally fueling burnout? What are some new beliefs that you might be able to start using to shift your mindset about what it takes to be a successful educator?
- 3. Mindset and Reaction to Stressors:** According to the text, while educators can't always control the stressors, they can control their mindset and reaction. How do you cultivate a positive mindset even under stressful circumstances? Do you have a personal mantra that has been helpful to you?
- 4. Role of Positive Emotions:** The author emphasizes the significance of positive emotions in enhancing creativity, problem-solving skills, and physical health. Discuss how fostering positive emotions in the classroom can impact both teachers and student outcomes.
- 5. Strengths-Focused Approach:** Research suggests focusing on personal strengths can increase happiness and reduce depression. What was your Thrive-o-gram strength? Did your profile resonate with you?

- 6. Your Personal Road Map:** Using your Thriving Road Map from Appendix A as a guide, what is one action step you can take immediately to use your strengths? What were your “souvenir” ideas you want to share with students?

## Notes

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