

How a Gratitude and Positive Activity Journal Supports Recovery from Alcohol and Other Substance Use Disorders: A Framework Derived from Grounded Theory

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Background

- Enhancing subjective wellbeing during recovery from addiction is a compelling strategy for reducing relapse
- Interventions designed to strengthen recovery by improving subjective wellbeing are being developed, yet no universal, comprehensive model exists to explain this pathway.
- A universal, comprehensive theory could guide this emerging field.

Method

- We developed a journaling practice (Positive Peer Journaling, PPJ) to support recovery from addiction by increasing positive judgement of life in recovery and increasing general self efficacy. These factors would increase subjective wellbeing. PPJ involves reviewing the past 24 hours and planning the next 24 hours and was based on previous research:
 - Gratitude practices have been shown to improve affect (Dickens, 2017; Krentzman et al., 2015).
 - Activity scheduling has been shown to promote enjoyment of daily activities (Daughters et al., 2008).
 - Journaling helps express emotion leading to better health outcomes (Smyth, 1998).
- 15 research participants with severe addiction histories and an average of 48 days sober were taught PPJ and journaled 61.3% of days for 4.5 weeks.
- 11 participants completed in-depth semi-structured exit interviews to explain their experiences using PPJ.
- Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analytic techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2013) to capture themes in the data, identify the ways themes were related, and build a theory.
- Then, key readings in addiction, psychology, and positive psychology were studied to integrate established theory with grounded theory results.

The orange bubbles feature direct quotes from our research participants

Discussion

- Our model might also describe how other positive sobriety-enhancing activities operate to sustain addiction recovery
- Our model offers the field a common framework for future research

Journaling shows how subjective wellbeing during recovery from addiction leads to ongoing, sustained recovery from addiction.

What participants said they were like before journaling:

“I can be really negative”

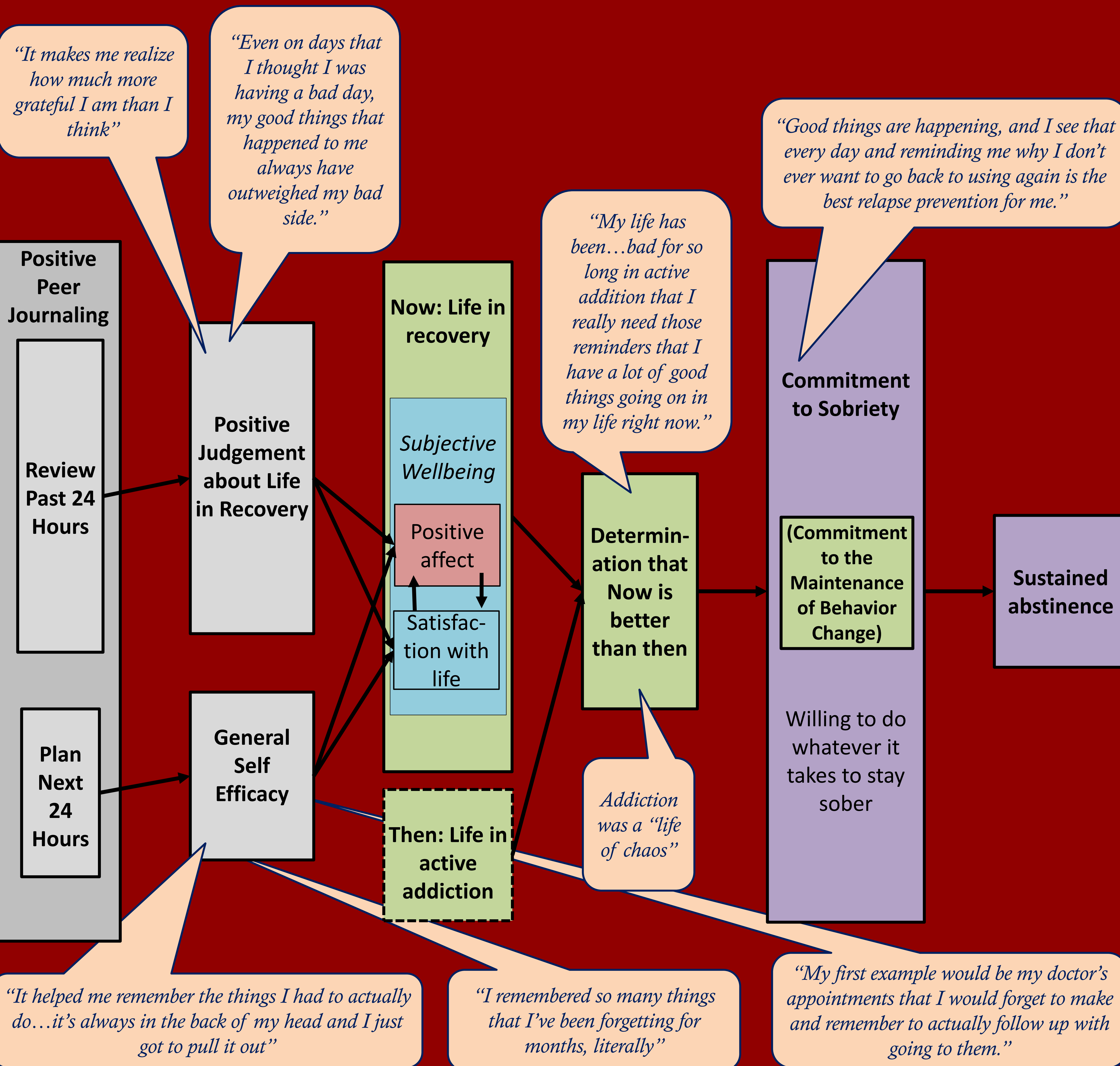
“I usually think there’s been a lot of bad stuff”

“I have a bad memory”

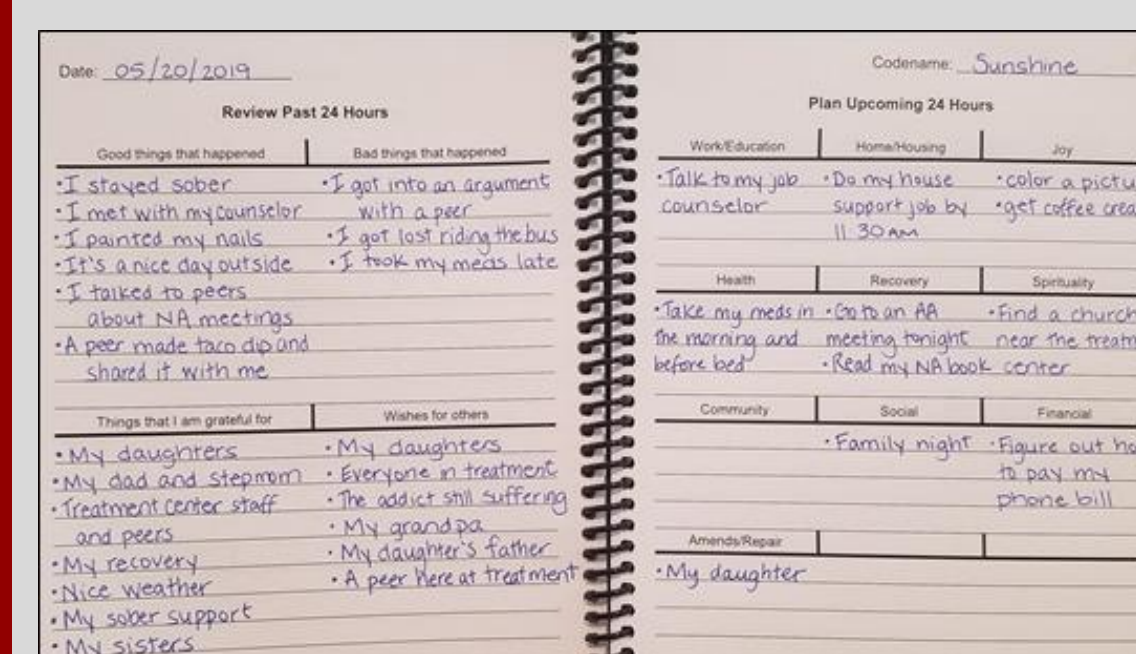
“I always forget appointments that I have”

“Vitamins for my prenatal...that would be something I would forget”

What participants said they were like after journaling:



Journal composite based on actual PPJ entries:



We combined results from grounded theory with these established theories to form the model. Elements in the model (at left) are color coded to map to influential theories as follows:

- Fredrickson’s Broaden and Build Theory of Positive Emotion
- Diener’s theory of subjective wellbeing
- Rothman’s theory of the maintenance of behavior change
- Kelly’s theory of the role of commitment to sobriety in sustained abstinence

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