According to Allport (1937), “an impartial and objective attitude toward oneself is held to be a primary virtue, basic to the development of all others ... if any trait of personality is intrinsically desirable, it is the disposition and ability to see oneself in perspective” (p. 422). Similarly, Jahoda (1953) claimed that a hallmark of healthy individuals is considering “matters one wishes were different, without distorting them to fit these wishes” (p. 349). In line with the viewpoints of these and other forerunners in psychology, this chapter presents a case for positive psychological interventions that promote positive yet realistic self-perceptions. Our recommendation arises from research showing that unrealistically positive self-perceptions – deemed self-enhancement – can actually hinder a person from succeeding and functioning optimally, whereas accurate self-perceptions yield a host of beneficial outcomes. In particular, we have conducted experiments directly comparing self-enhancement to accurate self-perceptions and consistently found that the former is detrimental, whereas the latter promotes academic excellence, motivation to improve and achieve, and psychological well-being. Likewise, robust research from within positive psychology supports this claim, which we will review in this chapter. Taking into account this body of evidence, interventions may be most effective in helping people to flourish if they encourage positive but realistic self-perceptions and if they provide effective methods to advance from a current, realistic self to a future, idealistic self. Indeed, in order to improve, be more successful, and lead fulfilling, meaningful lives, individuals need to have an accurate sense of themselves, their current abilities, and their current shortcomings, and to take action accordingly.

Furthermore, emphasizing realistic self-perceptions within positive psychological interventions separates positive psychology from other trends that promote artificial positive thinking. These trends, such as the self-esteem movement, the
power-of-positive-thinking movement, or The Secret, to name a few, are often combined with science-based positive psychology by laypeople and media sources. This chapter attests their distinction and importantly asserts that self-enhancement, which is a self-focused form of artificial positive thinking, is not beneficial and can be harmful. The same may be said of the aforementioned trends insomuch as they induce unrealistic, inflated self-perceptions. Indeed, the evidence presented in this chapter exemplifies the theme that positive psychology is not about merely thinking positively and experiencing positive emotions, which distinguishes positive psychological interventions from other unscientific practices by acknowledging the potential risks of promoting self-enhancement, instead endorsing accurate self-perceptions, and providing active, effective ways to improve, build skills, strengths, and relationships, form healthy habits, and, in short, to prosper enduringly. To be sure, positive psychology is focused on uncovering what enables us to be our best and how to cultivate lasting fulfillment – it is the scientific investigation of optimal functioning – and we hope that the following discussions will offer insight into how interventions can better achieve that goal by taking into account research on self-enhancement.

**Cautions from Self-Enhancement Research**

As Mark Twain observed, “We do not deal much in facts when we are contemplating ourselves.” Along these lines, individuals who self-enhance uphold favorable self-perceptions that are not supported by objective criteria. This bias is extremely common, even though people are capable of perceiving themselves accurately (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; John & Robins, 1994; Kim, Chiu, & Zou, 2010; Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Despite the pervasiveness of self-enhancement, investigators have documented many corresponding undesirable effects. Outcomes include poorer social skills; lower academic performance, self-esteem, resilience, and motivation to improve; higher levels of depression, dejection, and maladjustment; and maladaptive attitudes such as defensiveness, narcissism, hostility, and arrogance (e.g. Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Gresham, Lane, MacMillan, Bocian, & Ward, 2000; Kim & Chiu, 2011; Kim et al., 2010; Kurt & Paulhus, 2008; Kwan, John, Robins, & Kuang, 2008). These consequences are incompatible with achieving a flourishing, optimal life. Indeed, someone who self-enhances may not be able to make personal progress due to such factors as low motivation and improper time allocation (Fürsterling & Morgenstern, 2002; Kim et al., 2010). This line of evidence is supported theoretically, as well. For example, people who perceive themselves as better than they actually are do not acknowledge a need to improve, and subsequently will not engage in additional effort because they are not motivated by a need to improve, and therefore cannot advance themselves. On the other hand, people who perceive themselves realistically take into account both their strengths and shortcomings, can identify the need for improvement, will not
be impaired by a lack of achievement motivation, and can apply effort appropriately in a given domain.

Congruent with this reasoning, we have repeatedly shown the detrimental effects of self-enhancement and identified positive outcomes that arise from accurate self-perceptions. To begin, in a study by Kim and colleagues (2010), 283 university students completed a math test and were given either positive bogus feedback, negative bogus feedback, or no feedback about their performance, to induce self-enhancement, self-effacement (which we will discuss in a later section), or their own self-perceptions, respectively. Given that tests are familiar to students, they are able to perceive their performance fairly accurately. Indeed, in a pilot study to confirm this point, 83% of students accurately assessed their math test performance, or were off by only one mark, when given monetary incentive for accuracy. Thus, in the experiment, when participants perceived their performance on the math test as only “alright” but were informed that they performed very well compared to 800 other university students, these individuals experienced induced self-enhancement. Subsequently, participants were informed that they would complete another math test with different questions, supposedly to evaluate the impact of noise on performance, and were given the choice of seven noise levels (ranging from no noise at all to very loud noise). The experimenters stated that louder noise can severely degrade performance on math tests, regardless of test takers’ actual math ability, and then asked the participants to choose a noise level. Those with induced self-enhancement (i.e., low actual performance but high performance feedback) chose higher levels of noise than those with accurate self-perceptions, indicating self-handicapping. This finding was theoretically consistent with the authors’ hypothesis: people who receive feedback that is more positive than their initial self-perceptions are pleased, adopt self-enhancement, and are motivated to protect the enhanced identity. However, based on their knowledge of previous math test ability, these individuals know that the enhanced self-perception is not realistic. Thus, they will self-handicap to provide an excuse for any subsequent discrepancy in performance, so that they can justify maintaining a desirable, enhanced self-perception. In this case, by choosing to work in a noisier environment despite knowing that doing so could negatively impact their performance, participants with induced self-enhancement created an anticipatory excuse to account for lower performance on the second math test, thereby enabling maintenance of their enhanced self-perception from the first math test. For the purposes of this chapter, we want to underline that while self-handicapping may enable preservation of an enhanced self-perception, it also by definition inhibits a person from performing optimally. Therefore, the finding that self-enhancement induces greater self-handicapping behavior is one compelling example of how self-enhancement is detrimental and impedes individuals from achieving their best.

In another study, 136 university students also completed a math test and were provided bogus performance feedback in the same way (Kim et al., 2010). Then, these students were given the option to wait for eight minutes or to use the time to work on an ungraded tutorial exercise consisting of anagrams, which they were
informed would augment their performance on a subsequent, graded task. The authors used the number of anagrams attempted to indicate preparatory effort, finding that participants with induced self-enhancement attempted fewer anagrams and therefore invested less preparatory effort into the task. In this way, self-enhancement was again associated with more self-handicapping and furthermore with lower achievement motivation, which can only hinder a person from succeeding or flourishing. Indeed, additional studies showed that self-enhancers achieved lower task performance and actually had lower grade point averages (GPAs) than accurate self-perceivers (Kim et al., 2010). Moreover, in a final study, students who perceived themselves as ranking higher in a course than they actually ranked, signifying self-enhancement, reported lower levels of subjective well-being. This emotional outcome was in line with theoretical predictions, because individuals who self-enhance are constantly wary of having their enhanced self-perceptions disproven and therefore experience intensified concerns and emotional distress related to evaluative situations. In short, self-enhancement has inhibiting effects that oppose the exact aims of positive psychological interventions.

Similarly, we examined the effects of self-enhancement in direct comparison to accurate self-perceptions over four years (Kim, Killam, Shigeto, & Grison, 2013). In order to provide an objective comparison, we identified self-enhancers as students who self-assessed their exam grades as higher than they actually scored, whereas we pinpointed participants as having accurate self-perceptions if their self-assessments matched their actual exam grades. Given that exam-taking is a familiar task for students, they have fairly accurate knowledge of their exam performance and so can accurately self-perceive in that domain. Our analysis showed that students who self-enhanced in the first semester of their undergraduate degree consistently attained lower GPAs each semester thereafter until graduation, compared to those who accurately self-perceived. Furthermore, the individuals with accurate self-perceptions improved academically over the four years to a greater extent than did the self-enhancers.

In another study, people who self-enhanced in the same way demonstrated lower motivation to improve their performance on an assigned task, as indicated by their responses to a survey about achievement motivation and by their self-handicapping behaviors, than those with accurate self-perceptions (Kim et al., 2013). As well, they reported stronger emotional distress, as shown by higher self-rated levels of agitation emotions (e.g., uneasy, on edge, tense) and dejection emotions (e.g., discouraged, low, upset). Notably, these results were apparent among European American, Asian American, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean participants, which underscores cross-cultural relevance of this phenomenon. Therefore, regardless of whether they arise from knowledge or belief, accurate self-perceptions are beneficial and help to structure growth and well-being, in line with the goals of positive psychological interventions.

Finally, of particular interest to clinical practitioners, Kim and Chiu (2011) posited that self-enhancement would predict the highest levels of depression and the lowest levels of self-esteem, whereas the opposite would be true for accurate
self-perceptions. Participants completed a verbal test, ranked their performance in comparison to peers at their school, and self-assessed how many questions they answered correctly. They also filled out the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). To construct an objective measure of self-enhancement, individuals who ranked themselves as higher than their actual rank and who claimed to have answered more questions correctly than they actually did were considered self-enhancers. In comparison to individuals with accurate self-perceptions (i.e., those who ranked themselves accurately and who reported the true amount of correct answers), self-enhancers were more depressed and had lower self-esteem. Overall, these examples from our research offer ample reason to acknowledge the problems associated with self-enhancement and the benefits of realistic self-perceptions, especially for elements like performance, motivation, and well-being that contribute to flourishing.

In light of these findings, we wish to caution that positive psychological interventions could be ineffective in fostering optimal living if they either directly or inadvertently encourage unrealistically positive self-perceptions. Endorsing an honest self-perception better prepares people to thrive, both in the short and long term. Hence, given the problems associated with self-enhancement and the benefits accompanying accurate self-perceptions, we advise for interventions that influence a person’s self-perception to strive to be realistic, albeit still being positive.

Emphasizing Positive yet Realistic Self-Perceptions

We will now discuss two examples from other areas of positive psychology research that support our assertion. First, a certain amount of negative emotion is advantageous. According to Fredrickson and Losada (2005), “problems can occur with too much positivity” and “appropriate negativity may play an important role” for human flourishing (p. 684). Appropriate negativity is defined as time-limited and connected to specific circumstances, rather than global and dominant. Accordingly, the authors determined that flourishing mental health corresponds with a ratio of positive to negative affect between 3:1 and 13:1, indicating that there is an upper limit above which positive emotions are no longer beneficial and that a person at his or her best still experiences some negative emotions. Therefore, Fredrickson and Losada (2005) emphasized that “positivity must be both appropriate and genuine” (p. 685), which opposes the feigned positivity that characterizes self-enhancement. This notion points to a realistic balance between positive and negative and is mirrored in our caution against self-enhancement. In short, the value of negative emotions is attuned with encouraging realistic self-perceptions that take into account both the positive and negative aspects of an individual.

Second, accurate self-perceptions may contribute to experiencing flow. An essential quality of the flow state is a matching of skill level with challenge; indeed, flow requires “perceived challenges, or opportunities for action, that stretch
(neither overmatching nor underutilizing) existing skills” and “a sense that one is engaging challenges at a level appropriate to one’s capacities” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 90). Thus, individuals aiming to trigger flow must engage in activities that are at an appropriate level, which we suggest is determined by realistic self-perception of their skills. Indeed, the importance of accurately perceiving one’s abilities is apparent from the impact of mismatched skills and challenge level: “If challenges begin to exceed skills, one first becomes vigilant and then anxious; if skills begin to exceed challenges, one first relaxes and then becomes bored” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 90). Even though this matching is subjective, it stands to reason that a realistic self-perception (based on belief or knowledge) would better enable people to gauge their skills and therefore succeed at identifying appropriately challenging activities to promote flow. In so much as flow is a desirable, optimal state and the ability to evaluate skill and challenge levels is useful for its occurrence, accurate self-perceptions can be valuable.

Progressing from Current to Ideal Self

In addition to advocating for accurate albeit positive self-perceptions, we aim to draw attention to the necessity of interventions that are habit-forming and skill-building. As Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) pointed out, scientific research has focused on increasing happiness, but not sufficiently on sustaining those increases. To fill this void, interventions have the opportunity to guide people in building and upholding fulfilling lives. In this way, individuals can methodologically advance from their initial state to one of lasting prosperity and wellness. We will refer to several existing interventions to illustrate this theme in greater detail.

To begin, in various positive psychological interventions, individuals think about their ideal selves, thereby focusing on a positive self-perception. For instance, during the “Best Possible Self” exercise, participants visualize and write about the best version of themselves (King, 2001). They are instructed to “imagine yourself in the future, after everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your life goals. Think of this as the realization of your life dreams, and of your own best potentials” (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006, p. 77). This intervention has been associated with various benefits, such as increased subjective well-being (King, 2001) and positive affect (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Similarly, in a study by Seligman, Rashid, and Parks (2006), participants considered their ideal selves in this way: “Imagine that you have passed away after living a fruitful and satisfying life. What would you want your obituary to say? Write a 1–2 page essay summarizing what you would like to be remembered for the most” (p. 776). Another example is an optimism intervention in which participants wrote a letter to their current selves from the perspective of their future selves, imagining that their issues were resolved and giving advice to their current selves; this activity was linked with reduced
depressive symptoms for up to three months and increased happiness for up to six months (Shapira & Mongrain, 2010). We commend these interventions for providing activities that raise well-being.

However, to ensure that envisioning oneself as better than one is currently does not induce a kind of self-enhancement, and therefore to avoid the consequences associated with unrealistically positive self-perceptions, we propose that interventions not only induce thinking about an ideal self, but also offer active ways for people to achieve that envisioned better self. One possible limitation of such activities is that, although they have been shown to invoke beneficial outcomes, they may not guide comprehensive self-progress on their own. We believe that positive psychological interventions can strive to achieve the latter, such as by including components of goal setting and planning goal attainment, which in itself has been shown to increase levels of life satisfaction and positive affect (MacLeod, Coates, & Hetherton, 2008). Accordingly, after a person completes this kind of activity, positive interventions could be used to systematically bring to fruition the person’s ideal self. Indeed, there is support for this suggestion: in the aforementioned example of an optimism intervention, the imagined future self’s advice for resolving issues actually “may have helped participants engage in active coping by delineating the next steps they needed to take to achieve their ideal goal state” (Shapira & Mongrain, 2010, p. 387). We would like to emphasize the importance of these “steps.” As we have learned from our experiments on self-enhancement, for individuals to progress toward their ideal, future selves, they need to accurately perceive their realistic, current selves, gauge the discrepancies with their ideal, imagined selves, and then develop active ways to build skills and bridge the gap. After all, optimal functioning is not passive. For instance, individuals in a flow state are “tackling a series of goals, continuously processing feedback about progress, and adjusting action based on this feedback” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 90). Similarly, developing well-being requires applied effort to both carry out and maintain happiness-boosting activities (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

As well, research on grit – that is, “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007, p. 1087) – reinforces our case further. Specifically, people who excel in a given domain are those who engage in deliberate practice to improve (Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Berstein, & Ericsson, 2011). In order to do so, we suggest that individuals must first hold realistic understandings of their abilities and shortcomings so that they can strategically apply themselves and improve. The grit model’s emphasis on effort underscores a helpful approach for interventions. In the context of positive psychology, knowing what steps to take next, with the goal of improving and flourishing, may require an accurate self-perception at the outset. Subsequently, interventions can provide tangible methods for progressing to an ideal self. Therefore, we propose that realistic self-perception is a prerequisite and interventions are the courses one takes to flourish. In other words, accurate self-perceptions are an essential starting point, and thereafter positive psychological interventions have the opportunity to help people build sustainably better lives.
Along these lines, hope interventions may offer an example of both envisioning an ideal self and providing a structure to achieve that ideal self. For instance, Feldman and Dreher (2012) aimed to increase hopeful, goal-directed thinking among college students. During their intervention, participants chose a personally relevant goal; were taught about hope, goal pathways, and agency; wrote about steps to take to achieve the goal, possible obstacles, and accompanying resolutions; and visualized engaging in the steps, overcoming obstacles, and ultimately achieving the goal. Afterward, these individuals showed greater hope and sense of purpose and, most relevant to our discussion, had made more progress on their goals one month later than people in the control conditions. Thus, focusing on active ways to improve is important during interventions, so that tangible progress can be made from the current self to an ideal, flourishing self.

Likewise, Lyubomirsky and colleagues (2011) concluded that positive interventions require both “a will” to engage in the activity – that is, personal motivation or desire, as shown by self-selection for and continued effort with the intervention – and “a proper way” – that is, a suitable, efficacious activity. This claim is especially true if the effects are to endure; as the authors reported, “sustainable increases in happiness are possible, but only if pursued under optimal conditions, such as when people are motivated to perform a positive activity, when they bring to bear effort and persistence, and when the activity is a legitimately efficacious one” (Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011, p. 397). In other words, positive psychological interventions have the potential to systematically aid motivated individuals in not only reaching, but also maintaining a more flourishing life through more focus on deliberate steps. After all, temporarily boosting happiness is valuable progress, but fostering enduring fulfillment is the ultimate goal of interventions.

One final example is Louis’ (2011) distinction between positive interventions that only include talent identification and those that extend their scope to cultivate strength development. The former is a “process of identifying, understanding, and affirming talent themes” but does not provide instruction for developing skills further (Louis, 2011, p. 205). In contrast, the latter method identifies talents and then includes specific activities and strategies to build and refine strengths. Students who only trained in a talent identification intervention shifted toward a fixed mindset regarding capabilities and character, which could inhibit them from applying their talents in useful ways. Talent identification focuses on positive qualities without motivating the person to acknowledge negative qualities; it is akin to self-enhancement that entails an unrealistically positive self-perception but does not give rise to recognition of negative aspects of oneself or to improvement motivation. In sum, strengths interventions “must extend beyond helping participants understand and appreciate their unique signature talent themes to include an emphasis on the effort required to develop talents” (Louis, 2011, p. 212).

In summary, we caution that mere thinking about an ideal self may be risky or insufficient for comprehensive flourishing, which highlights the need for interventions to provide structured ways to advance, foster habits, and build strengths
toward actualization of that ideal self. Doing so can help to differentiate positive psychology, with its roots in scientific evidence and efficacious results, from folk theories and popular trends that advocate unqualified positive thinking.

The Self-Perception Equilibrium

We would like to note two stipulations. Specifically, by taking into account the harm caused by self-effacement and the value of self-compassion, we wish to highlight that accurate self-perceptions do not necessitate being overly self-critical and indeed should still embrace an optimistic, kind approach to oneself.

First, akin to self-enhancement yielding a host of negative effects, swinging the pendulum too far in the opposite direction is also problematic. Notably, self-effacement – unrealistically negative self-perceptions, or unfavorable self-perceptions that are not supported by objective criteria – has been found to be ubiquitously detrimental. One consequence is that individuals who self-efface tend to be depressed and have low self-esteem (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Nonetheless, congruent with our overarching assertion, some self-critique is adaptive. According to Sedikides and Luke (2008), self-enhancement can be beneficial if offset by self-criticism, as indicated by higher optimism, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. On the whole, a balanced, realistic self-perception is ideal. Simply put, “mentally healthy people have a relatively accurate sense of self, are willing to present this imperfect self to the social world, and distort reality primarily to maintain manageable levels of anxiety” (Colvin & Griffo, 2008, p. 124).

Second, accurate self-perceptions should still be positive, and upholding an optimistic, accepting view of oneself can be compatible with being realistic. For instance, individuals who demonstrate high self-compassion maintain higher intrinsic motivation after disappointment, cope with negative feelings using adaptive emotion-focused strategies, adopt mastery goals, demonstrate more positive relationship behaviors, are shielded from anxiety, and gain psychological well-being (Neff & Beretvas, 2013; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). More precisely, self-compassion consists of being caring and understanding with oneself about shortcomings, recognizing that everyone is imperfect, and mindfully acknowledging negative emotions (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Thus, working with negative aspects of oneself is not at the expense of a positive, compassionate self-perception, and this balance lays the foundation for flourishing. Additionally, positive interventions may find value in adopting this line of research: a mindful self-compassion program was shown to increase well-being immediately and at 6- and 12-month follow-ups (Neff & Germer, 2013).

One final consideration was raised in a meta-analysis by Schueller and Seligman (2012). They found that positive psychological interventions that employed cognitive rather than behavioral exercises led to greater increases in subjective well-being. Thus, in line with envisioning an ideal self, interventions that change what we think about ourselves can certainly have positive effects on subjective
measures. However, they may not be the most effective way to develop ourselves on more objective measures related to flourishing, which is shown by the detrimental consequences associated with self-enhancement and the benefits that come from realistic self-perceptions. A highly favorable self-perception does not necessarily equate with positive, tangible outcomes. Thus, while thinking positively about oneself may yield some benefits, we contend that individuals truly improve and prosper through cultivating accurate self-perceptions and taking strategic action to move forward.

**Conclusion**

The underlying message of this chapter is that cultivating honest self-perceptions better prepares individuals to flourish. Evidence from our research on self-enhancement and from other areas of positive psychology highlights that positive is beneficial in so much as it is grounded in reality; accurate self-perceptions help people to become the best they can be. We hope to have demonstrated that “the goal of individuals becoming competent, constructive critics of themselves is of the utmost importance to their ability to lead full, satisfying, participatory lives” (Bergner, 2008, p. 243). Therefore, we emphasize that positive psychological interventions must avoid encouraging self-enhancing tendencies, thereby helping people to develop their ideal selves, and do so in a way that emphasizes effort to actively build talents and skills. Lastly, we hope to have made a case for distinguishing positive psychology from artificial positive thinking through the use of empirically supported, active interventions.

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