

Active–Constructive Responding

Communication

Exercise

20 min.

Group

No

Research by Gable and colleagues (2004) has shown that sharing personal positive events with others is associated with increased daily positive affect and well-being. This process has been referred to as capitalization (Langston, 1994). Capitalization can be understood as an interpersonal process involving two key elements: (1) the sharer disclosing information about a positive event to the responder; and (2) the reaction (or the perceived reaction) of the responder.

Importantly, the potential benefits of capitalizing on positive events are dependent on the reaction of the responder. There are four possible ways in which one can respond to the good events in others' lives. They are: active-constructive, passive-constructive, active-destructive, passive-destructive.

Research shows that only the active–constructive response is beneficial to the responder and to the relationship between the sharer and responder. An active-constructive reaction involves responding to the positive disclosure with enthusiasm. For instance, when someone shares that he managed to get the raise in salary he had been working toward, an active-constructive response of the other person could be: "That is awesome! I know how hard you have been working on that."

This type of response increases the savouring of positive feelings involved (Reis et al., 2010). The other three response styles are negatively related to well-being (Gable et al., 2004). In this exercise participants will experience how the four different response styles can influence their personal well-being.

Goal

This group exercise introduces clients to the concept of capitalization interactions. A participant talks about something positive that happened to him/her and another person responds to that disclosure. The goal of this exercise is to increase awareness of how one's reactions to the good news of others can affect their well-being.

Advice

- This exercise works great as a practical introduction to the topic capitalization. After experiencing the effects of different types of responses, participants can be introduced to the theoretical underpinnings of capitalization.
- Participants may worry that their responses will sound phony or scripted when they are asked to apply the active constructive response style. In practice, however, once the participants start they exercise, they generally find it easy to do.
- This exercise may also be used for clients who would like to have more satisfying relationships and it may be particularly valuable for couples. As the practitioner, it is appropriate to help clients to distinguish between the four different types of responding. Most importantly, it is

important to have clients practice Active Constructive Responding so that it becomes part of their everyday conversations.

- Participants can practice with building a more active-constructive responding style at home by first monitoring their usual style of responding. This can be done by keeping a daily log of their interpersonal interactions. When they notice that they are not engaging in an active-constructive style frequently enough, they may write down what could have been said to make the response active and constructive and then think about how this style could be used more often in the future.
- In order to cultivate a more active-constructive response style, participants may also contact others with whom they failed to respond to in an active-constructive way and apologize for not being more engaged or positive with them.
- When using this exercise in an educational context, enhanced understanding of the four different styles may be accomplished by asking clients to generate examples of positive events and possible reactions that would fall into the four different categories. Preferably, this step is carried out after explaining the research and theory underlying the communication styles.



Suggested Readings

Gable, S. L., Gonzaga, G., & Strachman, A. (2006). Will you be there for me when things go right? supportive responses to positive event disclosures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91, 904–917.

Gable, S. L., & Reis, H. T. (2010). good news! Capitalizing on positive events in an interpersonal context. in M. Zanna (ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, (42; pp. 195–257). New York, NY: Elsevier Press.

Gable, S. L., Reis, H. T., Impett, E., & Asher, E. R. (2004). What do you do when things go right? the intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits of sharing positive events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87, 228–245.

Langston, C. A. (1994). Capitalizing on and coping with daily-life events: Expressive responses to positive events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 1112–1125.

Murray, S. L., Holmes, J. G., & Collins, N. L. (2006). Optimizing Assurance: The Risk Regulation System in Relationships. *Psychological Bulletin*, 132, 641–666.

Reis, H. T., & Shaver, P. (1988). Intimacy as an Interpersonal Process. In: S. Duck (ed.), *Handbook of personal relationships* (pp. 367–389). Chichester, England: Wiley.

Reis, H. T., Smith, S. M., Carmichael, C. L., Caprariello, P. A., Tsai, F. F., Rodrigues, A., & Maniaci, M. R. (2010). Are you happy for me? How sharing positive events with others provides personal and interpersonal benefits. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 99, 311.

Tool Description

Instructions

This exercise introduces participants to the concept of capitalization interactions, in which one person talks about something positive that happened to him or her and another person responds to that disclosure.

Participants will receive different instructions based on the condition and the role to which they are randomly assigned. Please note that some time is needed for participants to prepare these instructions in advance.

Step 1: Create two groups

Divide participants into two equal groups: *interviewers* and *interviewees*. If there is an odd number of participants, put the extra person in the interviewee group.

Step 2: Hand out instructions to the interviewees

Give each interviewee a copy of the instructions shown in appendix B.

Step 3: Hand out instructions to the interviewers

In this exercise, there are four different types of instructions for the interviewers. These different instructions are shown in appendix C, D, E and F.

Each interviewer will randomly receive one of these four instructions. It is important for the instructor to not draw any attention to the fact that there are different instructions to make sure that participants are not aware of this fact. One possible way to do this is to print the different instructions and randomly order them in a pile. Next, each interviewer is handed one sheet (appendix C, D, E or F)

Step 4: Facilitate group discussion

Ask participants to discuss their experiences with the whole group. First, ask the interviewees to reflect on how they felt during the conversation and how it was to talk about the positive event. This question will result in different reactions. Next, inform participants that each interviewer had a different type of instruction. Interviewers may show their instructions to the interviewee. You may decide to add some additional time for participants to discuss their experiences in couples.

Step 5: Discuss the theoretical background

Start with explaining the concept of capitalization. Capitalization refers to sharing personal positive events with others.

The potential benefits of capitalizing on positive events are dependent on the reaction of the responder. Explain

that research has shown that this reaction has two important dimensions, namely a) how active versus passive the reaction is, and b) how constructive versus destructive the reaction is.

Ad A: An active reaction involves a responder who shows interest and involvement when the event is shared. In case of a passive reaction, the responder is reserved and subdued in his or her reply.

Ad B: A constructive reaction involves a responder who is positive and supportive when the event is shared. In contrast, a destructive reaction involves a responder who is negative and unsupportive when the event is shared. Combined, these two dimensions result in four different response styles: active-constructive, active-destructive, passive-constructive and passive-destructive.

Next, provide a concrete example of the four reaction types (see Appendix A) and explain to the group that research has shown that an active-constructive response is best for the person who is capitalizing on the positive event in that they report increased wellbeing and increased relationship satisfaction. There is a feeling of being understood and cared for by the listener. When the listener's response is passive or destructive, negative emotions are often elicited (Gable et al., 2004; Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006). There is a feeling of being misunderstood and not being cared for.

Appendix A: Overview of four different response styles

	<i>Constructive</i>	<i>Destructive</i>
Active	<p>Positive response, enthusiasm, smiling, maintaining eye contact, displaying positive emotions.</p> <p>Example: <i>"You will become a father? That's great news! I am sure you will be a great dad!"</i></p>	<p>Negative response, focusing on the down-side, negative non-verbal cues.</p> <p>Example: <i>"You will become a father? Believe me, you can forget about having any free time for yourself."</i></p>
Passive	<p>Positive response, happy, but lacking enthusiasm, little to no active emotional expression.</p> <p>Example: <i>"You will become a father? That's nice, man."</i></p>	<p>Negative response, lacking interest, little to no eye contact, turning away.</p> <p>Example: <i>"You will become a father, huh?" Well, can you make sure to hand in those files in time?</i></p>

Appendix B: Instructions for all interviewees

Please read the following instructions carefully:

In a few minutes, you will be interviewed about something positive that happened to you. It does not matter what kind of event you choose, how long ago it happened or how important it was. Just choose something positive that you feel comfortable talking about. The person interviewing you will ask you to describe the event and then may or may not ask additional questions.

During the interview, try to notice how you feel while talking about the event and how you feel about the way the interviewer is responding to your story.

Appendix C: Active-constructive Response Instructions

Please ask the person whom you are assigned to interview to describe his or her positive event. Do not show him or her your instructions.

While the other person is talking, you are going to try to react in a so-called active-constructive way. An active-constructive response means that you:

- are highly involved in the exchange
- react with interest and enthusiasm regarding the event
- react positively towards the person
- actively ask questions about the event
- actively ask questions about the impact of the event
- make enthusiastic comments, such as “that sounds wonderful” or “you must be (have been) really proud
- make good eye contact

In sum, your general attitude during the conversation is enthusiastic, excited and happy. Try to be an active and supportive interviewer.

Appendix D: Active-destructive Response Instructions

Please ask the person whom you are assigned to interview to describe his or her positive event. Do not show him or her your instructions.

While the other person is talking, you are going to try to react in a so-called active-destructive way. An active-destructive response means that you:

- are highly involved in the exchange
- minimize the importance of the positive event
- focus on the potential downsides of the positive event
- actively ask questions about any potential negative aspects regarding the event
- question the positivity of the event by asking questions such as “what is so ‘good’ about this good event?”

In sum, try to be an active but questioning interviewer, who attempts to make the shared event seem not so great in the first place.

Note: If you find it difficult to respond in this way, just remember that this is just an exercise. This interview is for demonstration purposes only and you and your interviewee will be discussing your responses and the instructions afterwards.

Appendix E: Passive-constructive Response Instructions

Please ask the person whom you are assigned to interview to describe his or her positive event. Do not show him or her your instructions.

While the other person is talking, you are going to try to react in a so-called passive-constructive way. An passive-constructive response means that you:

- are not very involved in the exchange
- react positively, but with reserved interest and enthusiasm regarding the event
- do not ask additional questions about the event
- do not elaborate on the statements of the other person

In sum, your responses should appear positive or supportive on the surface, but they are reserved and subtle. Try to be try to be a pleasant but uninvolved interviewer.

Appendix F: Active-destructive Response Instructions

Please ask the person whom you are assigned to interview to describe his or her positive event. Do not show him or her your instructions.

While the other person is talking, you are going to try to react in a so-called passive-destructive way. A passive-destructive response means that you:

- are not very involved in the exchange
- show little or no interest in the positive event
- do not make much eye contact
- change the subject completely
- talk about yourself or about something unrelated to the positive event
- ask mundane questions about everyday life (e.g., “What did you have for breakfast this morning?”)

In sum, try to be a detached and uninterested interviewer.

Note: If you find it difficult to respond in this way, just remember that this is just an exercise. This interview is for demonstration purposes only and you and your interviewee will be discussing your responses and the instructions afterwards.