

# The UCONN Buzz



## DEVELOPING A POSITIVE OUTLOOK

Do you tend to look on the bright-side of life? A growing body of research suggests that having a positive outlook can benefit your physical health. NIH-funded scientists are working to better understand the links between your attitude and your body. Their evidence suggests that emotional wellness can be improved by developing certain skills.

“Having a positive outlook doesn’t mean you never feel negative emotions, such as sadness or anger,” says [Dr. Barbara Fredrickson](#), a psychologist and expert on emotional wellness at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. “All emotions, whether positive or negative, are adaptive in the right circumstances. The key seems to be finding a balance between the two,” she says.

“Positive emotions expand our awareness and open us up to new ideas, so we can grow and add to our toolkit for survival,” she explains. “But people need negative emotions to move through difficult situations and respond to them appropriately in the short term. Negative emotions can get us into trouble, though, if they’re based on too much rumination about the past or excessive worry about the future, and they’re not really related to what’s happening in the here and now.” People who are emotionally well have better resilience to challenges and are able to bounce back from difficulties faster. Another sign of emotional wellness is being able to hold onto positive emotions longer and appreciate the good times. Focusing on what’s important & developing a sense of meaning and purpose in life also contribute to emotional wellness.

[Research has found a link](#) between an upbeat mental state and improved health, including lower blood pressure, reduced risk for heart disease, healthier weight, better blood sugar levels, and longer life. However, studies cannot determine whether positive emotions lead to better health; if being healthy causes positive emotions, or if other factors are involved. “While earlier research suggests an association between positive emotions and health, it doesn’t reveal the underlying mechanisms,” says [Dr. Richard Davidson](#), a

neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “To understand the mechanisms, I think it will be crucial to understand the underlying brain circuits.” By using brain imaging, Davidson and others have found that positive emotions can trigger “reward” pathways located deep within the brain. Continued activation of this part of the brain has been linked to healthful changes in the body, including lower levels of a stress hormone.

In contrast, negative emotions can activate a brain region known as the amygdala, which plays a role in fear and anxiety. “We’ve shown that there are big differences among people in how rapidly or slowly the amygdala recovers following a threat,” Davidson says. “Those who recover more slowly may be more at risk for a variety of health conditions compared to those who recover more quickly.”

Among those who appear more resilient and better able to hold on to positive emotions are people who’ve practiced various forms of [meditation](#). In fact, growing evidence suggests that several techniques, such as meditation, [cognitive therapy](#) (a type of psychotherapy), and [self-reflection/introspection](#), can help people develop the skills needed to make positive, healthful changes.

“Research points to the importance of certain kinds of training that can alter brain circuits in a way that will promote positive responses,” Davidson says. “It’s led us to conclude that well-being can be considered as a life skill. If you practice, you can actually get better at it.” In one study, Davidson and his colleagues found changes in reward-related brain circuits after people had 2 weeks of training in a simple form of meditation that focuses on compassion and kindness. These changes were linked to an increase in positive social behaviors such as increased generosity. Fredrickson and her colleagues are also studying meditation. They found that after 6 weeks of training in compassion and kindness meditation, people reported increased positive emotions and social connectedness compared to an untrained group. The meditation group also had improved functioning in a nerve that helps to control heart rate. “The results suggest that taking time to learn the skills to self-generate positive emo-

tions can help us become healthier, more social, more resilient versions of ourselves,” Fredrickson says.

[Dr. Emily Falk](#), a neuroscientist at the University of Pennsylvania, is exploring how self-affirmation can affect your brain and lead to positive, healthful behaviors. Her team found that when people are asked to think about things that they find meaningful, a brain region that recognizes personally relevant information becomes activated. This brain activity can change how people respond to health advice.

“In general, if you tell people that they sit too much and they need to change their behavior, they can become defensive. They’ll come up with reasons why the message doesn’t apply to them,” Falk says. But if people reflect on the things they value before the health message, the brain’s reward pathways are activated. This type of self-affirmation, Falk’s research shows, can help physically inactive “couch potatoes” get more active. In a recent study, inactive adults received typical health advice about the importance of moving more and sitting less. But before the advice, about half of the participants were asked to think about things that they value most. The “self-affirmation” group became more physically active during the month-long study period that followed compared to the group that hadn’t engaged in self-affirmation. “The study shows one way that we can open the brain to positive change and help people achieve their goals,” Falk says.

Being open to positive change is a key to emotional wellness. “Sometimes people think that emotions just happen, kind of like the weather,” Fredrickson says. “But research suggests that we can have some control over which emotions we experience.” As mounting research suggests, having a positive mindset might help to improve your physical health as well.

Source: NIH News in Health

## HAPPENINGS AROUND TOWN

**Until Help Arrives** - Thursday, August 2nd, 6-8pm at Mill Brook Place, Coventry. This **FREE** class will teach basic skills to keep people with life-threatening injuries alive until professional help arrives.

**27th Annual Steeple Chase Bike Tour** - Saturday, August 18th, 7am at Eastern CT State University. Bike riders can choose from a 100-mile, 62.5-mile, 50-mile, 35-mile and 20-mile ride, to raise money for three critical Windham County social service agencies. The Steeple Chase Bike Tour is named for its "steeple stops," rest stops placed strategically along the routes either at churches or at other locations staffed by members of local churches. Pre-registration for the event is \$25 for individual riders or walkers, and \$75 for groups of four. Day-of registration is \$30 for individuals and \$85 for groups

**Lutz Museum Family Campout** - August 10-12th, at Gay City state Park, Hebron. The Lutz Museum will provide dinner on Friday night. Kids can play until it gets dark & then we will meet around the campfire for a sing-along, s'mores, and storytelling. Saturday meals are on your own but we encourage everyone to bring enough to share and trade. Museum staff will organize some fun activities. Cost is only \$10 per person for everything, but we do need an accurate headcount. Call the museum to make your reservation (860) 643-0949.

**Sunset Yoga** - Monday, August 6th, 6:30pm at the Jon Treat Farm, Bolton. Experience a breathtaking view of the Connecticut River valley during an all-levels yoga class led by certified yoga instructor Debbie Livingston (rain date Mon., Aug 13th).



## BE THE FIRST TO KNOW



Sources: National Institutes of Health, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Journal of Perinatal & Neonatal Nursing, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, SimplyPsychology.org, U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services Office of Women's Health, U.S. Breastfeeding Committee, EHHD

### Stuffed Eggplant

#### INGREDIENTS

- ◆ 1½ cups bread crumbs
- ◆ 2 eggplants
- ◆ 2 tomatoes, diced
- ◆ ½ cup green bell pepper, diced
- ◆ ½ cup onion, diced
- ◆ 1/3 cup celery, diced
- ◆ 1/8 Tbsp. salt
- ◆ ¼ Tbsp. black pepper
- ◆ 2 Tbsp. fresh parsley, minced

#### DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.
2. Cut eggplants in half lengthwise. Scoop out and save the flesh, leaving the shells 3/8-inch thick. If necessary, trim a small piece off the bottom of each shell so it won't tip over. Set aside.
3. Coat large skillet with vegetable cooking spray. Chop up reserved eggplant and add to skillet. Add tomato, bell pepper, onion, celery, salt, and black pepper. Place skillet over medium heat; cover & cook about 5 minutes, until vegetables are tender.
4. Remove skillet from heat. Stir in bread crumbs and parsley. Spoon mixture into the eggplant.
5. Arrange stuffed shells in a shallow baking dish coated with vegetable spray. Sprinkle 1½ tps Parmesan on top of each shell. Bake for 25 minutes, until filling heats through and top is golden brown.



## August is National Breastfeeding Month

While breastfeeding is as old as the human race, the month was only officially declared in August 2011 by the United States Breastfeeding Committee (USBC), although the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has been advocating breastfeeding awareness for decades by driving an annual campaign to empower women to commit to breastfeeding.

### Breastfeeding Facts:

**Breastfeeding in public is legal** - According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, **All 50 states**, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands have laws that specifically allow women to breastfeed in any public or private.

**Breastfeeding moms get more sleep** - it's estimated that breastfeeding moms get an extra 45 minutes of sleep per night, according to a study in the Journal of Perinatal and Neonatal Nursing.

**Breastfeeding Rates Are Higher Than People Think** - Data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports 81% of mothers start breastfeeding immediately after birth. Moms over 30 have the highest breastfeeding rate, at over 75 percent.

**Breastfeeding burns calories**- Producing breast milk requires extra energy. Experts estimate the number of calories burned breastfeeding ranges from 300 to 500 a day. To shed any excess weight after giving birth, you can typically consume the same num-

ber of calories as you did before getting pregnant, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Women's Health.

**For more about celebrating National Breastfeeding Month and participating in upcoming USBC events visit [www.usbreastfeeding.org](http://www.usbreastfeeding.org) and [www.breastfeedingct.org](http://www.breastfeedingct.org)**

Be Well is an employee wellness program provided through the Eastern Highlands Health District with funding from The CT Department of Health. The goal of the program is to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

