

## How to Succeed in College and Life

By Jeanette van der Lee | June 2, 2017 | 0 Comments

The professors behind NYU's "Science of Happiness" course explain how to flourish in life—no matter how old you are.

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**You should get some exercise, eat healthy, and sleep enough. You should be supportive of your friends. You should do what you're passionate about.**

We've all gotten such well-meaning advice, and it's not unhelpful. But it rarely comes with explanations of precisely *how* to achieve such worthy goals.

Fortunately, that's exactly what you'll get from *U Thrive: How to Succeed in College (and Life)*, a new book by Daniel Lerner and Alan Schlechter—two New York University professors who teach a course there on the science of happiness. *U Thrive* is the book that I (now a grad student) wish I had had when I started college.



Based on positive psychology research, it covers a wide range of strategies to for thriving in life, bringing them to life with humor, practical exercises, and even college slang. And while the book is written primarily for college students, its lessons are relevant to anyone wanting to cultivate a happier, healthier life.

### Skills for thriving

In their book, Lerner and Schlechter draw on the work of Martin Seligman, a pioneer in the field of positive psychology, who has identified five factors that help people thrive: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. They highlight many studies suggesting why these and related factors, such as optimism and goal-setting, are crucial to our well-being. And they identify practical ways to increase and improve them:

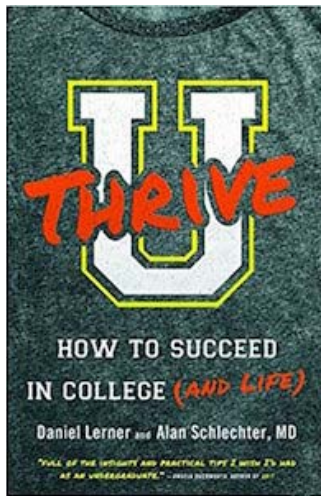
**Positive emotions.** Happiness—a positive emotion—has a long history of being almost synonymous with thriving, especially when it is developed through [the pursuit of meaningful activities](#). The authors point to research suggesting how happiness can be increased by doing five [random acts of kindness](#) on one day each week, which is just one of the many research-based tips readers can use to increase their own happiness.

**Engagement.** To increase engagement and meaning, Lerner and Schlechter suggest using your character strengths (which you can [discover for yourself](#) if you don't already know them). [Character strengths](#) are personal qualities—like being curious, loving, and hopeful—that have been identified by psychologists and shown to positively impact various domains of life, such as work and relationships.

**Relationships.** Many students [feel lonely](#) in their first year of college. But getting enough social interaction has important benefits, such as higher [stress tolerance](#) and more happiness: The happiest 10 percent of students [have more social relationships](#) than less happy students. One way Lerner and Schlechter suggest improving your relationships is by [sharing good news](#) with others, which helps you experience more positive emotion and well-being, especially when others [respond constructively](#).

In their discussion of optimism, Lerner and Schlechter cite research suggesting that optimists receive more [social support](#), cope better with [stressors](#), and stay [healthier](#), among other benefits. However, optimism is not *always* good: [Pessimists](#) focus on what might go wrong, and they are sometimes more prepared when things actually do go wrong.

As a result, the authors suggest a strategy called “mental contrasting,” or **WOOP** (which stands for wish, outcome, obstacle, plan) when working toward goals. WOOP involves focusing on the benefits of reaching your goal to increase motivation, but also focusing on the potential obstacles so that you can plan for them. In a [study](#) with low-income schoolchildren, using WOOP helped them to improve their attendance, conduct, and overall academic performance.



*U Thrive: How to Succeed in College (and Life)* by Daniel Lerner and Alan Schlechter (Little, Brown and Company, 2017, 304 pages)

In at least one case, the authors’ recommendations seem a little outdated, though. Lerner and Schlechter write that willpower is like a muscle: You can’t just keep using it, because after a while it will weaken. However, multiple researchers have tried and [failed](#) to replicate this effect. Still, the chapter offers useful advice on how to increase your willpower under certain circumstances, even though the willpower-as-a-muscle analogy may be flawed.

### Realistic tips for college and beyond

Though Lerner and Schlechter do focus on the importance of health and getting enough sleep, exercise, and nutrition, they don’t simply preach about eating veggies or snoozing eight hours per night. They realize that the behavior of college students is sometimes less than ideal.

“It’s bound to happen sooner or later: the paper you dreaded writing, the dense book you never got around to reading, the web page you neglected to design...and now the assignment you haven’t even begun is due tomorrow and you have no choice but to pull an all-nighter,” they write.

Rather than admonishing students, they recommend keeping a food and mood journal to help identify patterns, such as how the types of food you’ve eaten and the context in which you eat are related to increased and decreased energy. The authors also guide you in thinking about incorporating more exercise into your life, whether that means going to the gym or simply taking the stairs instead of the elevator.

Lerner and Schlechter stress the importance of excellence, meaning, and passion—topics I found particularly relevant to my own life—and uncover some important distinctions, like the difference between harmonious and obsessive passion.

Harmonious passion means doing what you love, while leaving room for other pursuits; you focus on learning rather than winning, so that failing is seen as an opportunity to learn. In contrast, obsessive passions are pursued for reasons other than love—like money or status—and can be all-consuming, so setbacks seem like failures.

To nudge obsessive passion in a more harmonious direction—and increase well-being—the authors suggest making time in your calendar for other pursuits (such as meeting with friends), changing your language to be more positive (e.g., saying “would like to” instead of “have to”), and finding additional passions to pursue.

Reading this book will equip you with many ideas like these on how to not just survive, but thrive—whether in college or in life. But you have to do more than read the book—you need to use it. Personally, I found the book’s message to be inspiring and convincing. It motivated me to pursue a job that I feel passionate about and to incorporate exercises that will help me thrive into my daily routine.

As the quote by Maya Angelou included in the book says, “My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style.” Hopefully, this book will inspire you to answer Angelou’s call, too!



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Likely



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Very Unlikely



Not sure

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### **About The Author**

**Jeanette van der Lee** is a graduate student in social and organizational psychology at Leiden University in the Netherlands with an interest in positive psychology. She recently completed a research internship at UC Berkeley, where she worked as a research assistant at the GGSC and in Dacher Keltner's Berkeley Social Interaction Laboratory.