

A Minute a Day Makes Good Feelings Grow

Abigail B. Calkin

with an introduction from Henry S. Pennypacker

Editor's Note from Henry S. Pennypacker

When Betsy Constantine asked me to review this paper for possible presentation on the web site, I eagerly agreed because I know Abigail Calkin as a personal friend who is also a gifted and entertaining writer. I looked forward to seeing something of hers before it had been sanitized by an academic editorial process. When I downloaded the paper and saw its title, however, I hesitated, wondering if the behavioral community served by the Cambridge Center was ready for something this soft and fuzzy. I could visualize some of my colleagues who contribute regularly to the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* ranting in unison about the absence of multiple observers. I could also feel the hot breath of some of my former students reciting the catechisms of response definition and measurement and demanding demonstration of experimental control through proper application of experimental design. Had I gotten myself into a situation that, at the very least, could prove embarrassing no matter which course of action I followed?

I decided to defer this anguish until I had at least read the paper. I read it once. I read it again, making some notes in the margins. In the process, I reached a decision. Abigail had provided us with an opportunity to do some intellectual stretching

The article is originally published on <http://www.behavior.org/> under Behavior in Everyday Life and Abigail Calkin (A Minute a Day Makes Good Feelings Grow). Reprinted with Permission. Reprinting the article with typographical corrections of the original. In her work with adults and children, Abigail B. Calkin has combined Precision Teaching and inner behavior since 1975. She has also published other articles in the field, as well as novels and poetry.

Henry S. Pennypacker is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Florida, CEO of Mammatech Corporation, Trustee of the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies, co-editor of the new *Journal of Behavior Technology*, and co-author of *Strategies and Tactics of Human Behavior Research*.

exercises and I would enthusiastically recommend that the paper be put on the web with a few minor editorial adjustments. To readers of Abigail's paper, I recommend viewing it in one or more of three contexts.

First, this contribution is the latest in a tradition that goes back at least to 1541 when St. Ignatius of Loyola began distributing *The Spiritual Exercises*, a small handbook for self improvement used by members of the Jesuit order. He describes a procedure for making dots along a line, "...as many dots as were the times he has fallen into that particular sin or defect." This is done twice a day and the pupil is instructed to compare the second line of dots with the first to see if there has been improvement. Thereafter, comparisons are made from day to day and from week to week. Since this work antedates both Descartes and Napier, we may forgive the absence of semi logarithmic coordinates.

Second, we are here dealing with private events in the sense that Skinner used that term. The article by Friman, Hayes, and Wilson (1998) that received so much attention provides a convenient source of references to Skinner's use of the term. In particular, they cite the passage from *About Behaviorism* (1974) in which Skinner states that radical behaviorism "does not insist upon truth by agreement and can therefore consider events taking place in the private world within the skin." Friman et al. conclude that "while remaining ever vigilant of the philosophical dangers presented by study of vaguely defined phenomena, behavior analysts should end their avoidance and begin their empirical and theoretical approach" (p. 153). Abigail has responded to this challenge in commendable fashion.

Finally, I find it convenient to view this work as a systematic replication of the widespread use of

one-minute (or less) timings by precision teachers. The current practice of using this procedure to increase frequencies of various academic skills like letter naming, saying math facts, etc., so as to build fluency is well documented (e.g., Johnson & Layng, 1992). Abigail's work uses almost exactly the same procedure, but with private rather than public response classes. The question should therefore be "How similar are the effects of various known variables when these responses are considered?" By induction from Abigail's small but growing data base, we can learn a great deal about this class of behavior. If some participants report greater happiness and satisfaction with their lives, are the data any less reliable? We won't know if we don't collect them. I thank Abigail for having the courage to submit this paper and getting us started.

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A Minute a Day Makes Good Feelings Grow

by Abigail B. Calkin

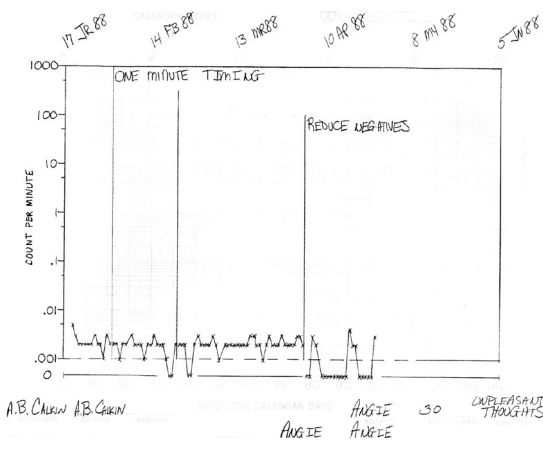
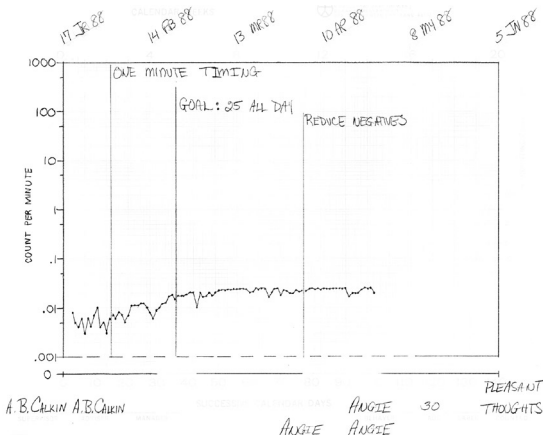
All my life I had listened to people tell me how smart, pretty, blah, blah, blah, I was.... Didn't believe them for one minute.... I knew they were saying these things just because they loved me. At age 36, I was a school psychologist and working on my dissertation, trying to maintain this professional demeanor, even at home. Problem: I felt overwhelmed by my life and, worse, my marriage was in trouble. I couldn't handle a divorce

for two reasons – 1) a second divorce would have devastated me and designated me as a failure; and 2) I did not want my son to have a mother who was twice divorced, for that gave him the wrong message about marriage and family.

To save my marriage and my sanity, I tried everything. I wrote in my journal every day. We were in counseling, I was in therapy. I was counting my positive feelings, negative feelings, and missed chances to have a feeling about myself. A missed chance occurred when someone complimented or insulted me and I had no positive or negative response. My husband and I would talk about our marital problems for 20 minutes each day, no more no less, and the rest of our time together we devoted to the routine, positive, and fun aspects of life. I wrote down my aim for my good feelings each day. I started a list of the good feelings and the things others had told me. Seven or nine things I tried simultaneously and none of them worked! I still felt I was a rotten person.

One morning, Sunday, 9 October 1977, to be exact, I looked at my three charts where I marked the number of good feelings, bad feelings, and missed opportunities to feel anything about myself. I had exactly two weeks to reach my aim of 40 good feelings a day, two weeks until my husband's birthday and I could give him the present of a better-feeling me. Given that I bounced between zero and 11 a day for good feelings and zero and 12 a day for bad, and these negative feelings were sometimes higher than the positives, I needed drastic action to give my husband a better-feeling wife in two weeks! I also started counting negative thoughts; they were between twelve and two hundred sixty a day. That's a lot of energy I put into believing I was a horrible person.

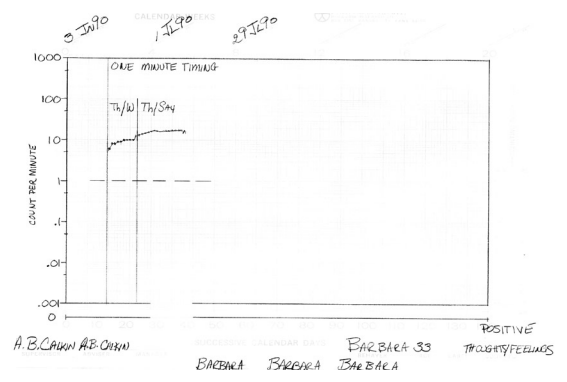
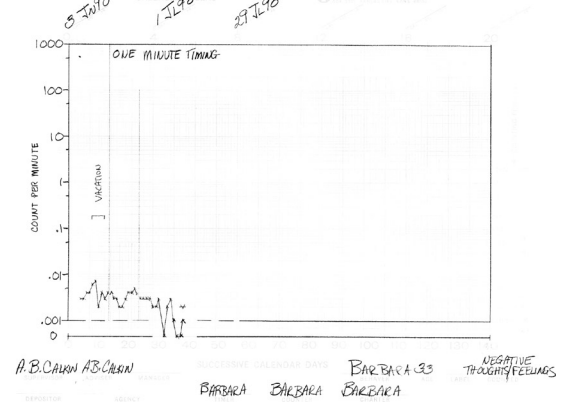
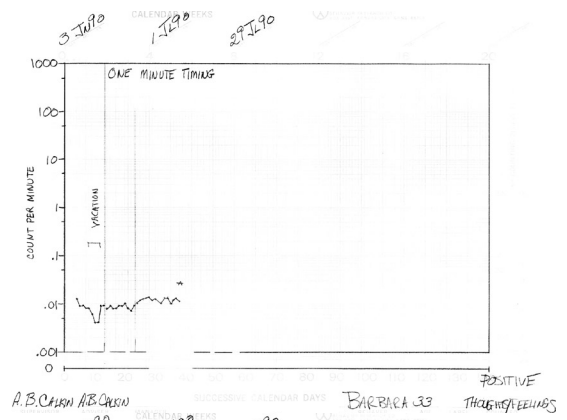
Fine, I thought. I've used one-minute timings with children for reading and math for nine years now. If it works for them, I'm willing to try anything no matter how crazy it sounds. I've been to the Lands of Crazy and Depression and, while it's fuel for writing, I didn't like it in either place. What's the worst that could happen? It wouldn't work. But it was worth a try for two weeks. Each morning for the next two weeks I wrote for one minute as many self-positives as I could, anything I could think, remember, had been previously told, whether or not I felt it during that minute.



Lynn thought she had serious mental and medical problems, took her data to the physicians and learned that, like me, she has some thought patterns different from the norm but, also like me, she's not crazy...perhaps just more sensitive and creative than most people. Tom counted his for the first time in 1986 to "become more aware of events which affect these feelings, discover things about yourself, and develop strategies to help change them." I have received a Christmas card from Tom every year since 1986, each one telling me how much fun, how rewarding this counting has been. In 1991, John began to count his "destructive and loving thoughts and feelings" for much the same reason I had: his marriage was in trouble. John's concluding statements: "Destructive thoughts and feelings are no longer a personal or potential family problem. Best of all, I did not have to pay a marriage counselor."

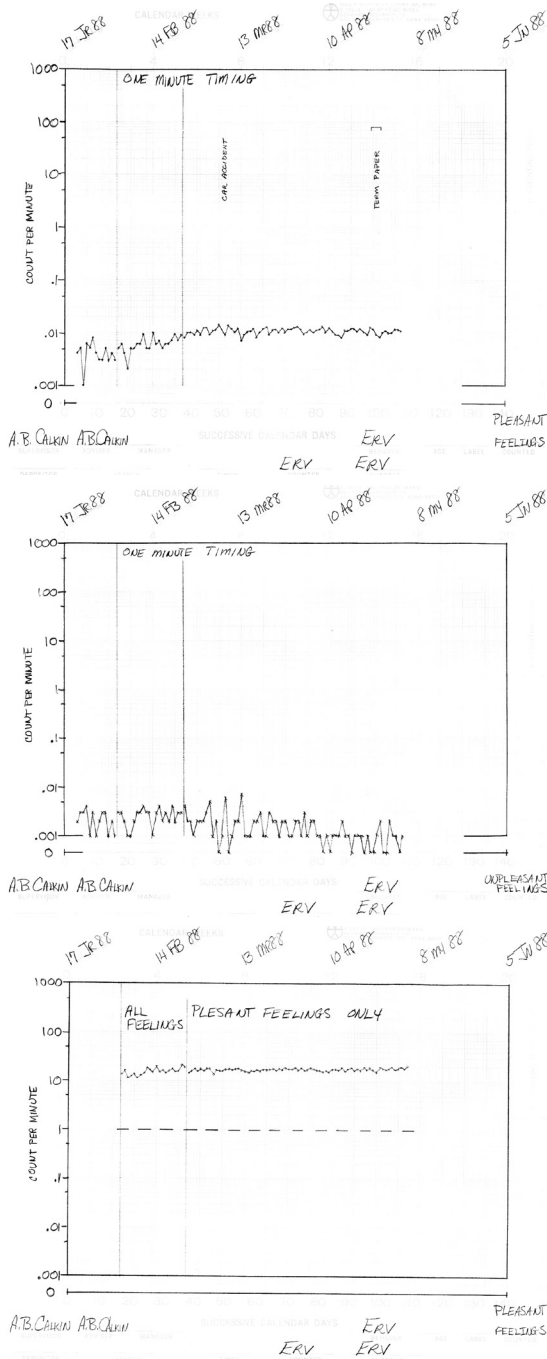
Barbara's positives were going down and her negatives were going up. She took a vacation and

the positive feelings went down. Oops! Writing down the positive thoughts and feelings in one minute helped her positives go up and negatives go down. What helped Barbara even more was saying them in one minute.



At first, Erv wrote down all his feelings in the one-minute timings. It did not help the negatives; in fact, they started increasing. I suggested he write only the positives. That helped the all-day positives to go up and negatives to go down. It

also narrowed the range of his positive one-minute and all-day counts.



While I could glibly say a minute a day keeps the psychologist away, I have found this

is not completely true. Sometimes issues are giant enough the person seems unable to count. When I first moved to Alaska in 1997, we lived in a tent while helping our son build the cabin. Fighting rain, cold weather, cooking in a lean-to, doing dishes in a pan, all left no energy to count anything. Indeed, I couldn't even look at whether I felt depressed about the situation, for such primitive living does not allow for any feelings or indulgence in self-examination. I felt like a hod carrier: drag out of bed in the morning, carry bricks all day, eat and fall in bed twelve hours later, only to get up for the rest of life to repeat the cycle. That leaves no energy to feel or think about anything. Nor, I think, does severe depression. The albatross becomes, not bricks but the trauma of abuse, violence, and the resultant huge and severe self-doubt of one's worth.

A friend and I once sat in a lounge comparing lives. By the time we graduated from high school, each of us had lived through five major life traumas—death of a parent, pregnancy, alcoholic parent, physical abuse, coming back from the other side of death's door, sexual abuse, in other words, not little traumas. What is it, we wondered, that had us sitting in the top 3% of professional women's positions and salaries? What made us different from the children we saw who had had one or two such events and succumbed to poor grades, depression, and overt anger? Our conversation occurred 20 years ago and I still do not know the critical pieces that differentiate between those who survive productively and those who slug along dragging that weighty albatross everywhere. I am, however, working on a list of the possible qualities that enable individuals to survive and recover from problems or crises.

While I continue to look for additional reasons, what is it I suggest?

1. Make a list of all your good aspects. Remember, there is not a not in this list! Write down every good or positive or pleasant thing you think about yourself. You have only two? Fine. That's where Crystal started also. Now add to that list every positive you've ever heard anyone—parents, grandparents, other family members, friends, teachers—say about you. I agree some people may say some positives that

stretch the imagination a bit, but giving compliments is an area where people usually tell the truth! When your grandmother says you're very pretty, smart, good, handsome, creative, artistic, trust her, for she's not lying to you. Write all the good things about you on your list. Leave room because you will add to your list. I made my first list in 1977; in the past two months I added two items to it.

2. *Make a list of the aspects that bother you, those you want to change. Put this list on the opposite side of the paper where you can fold it and never look at it again for a year or two! Why, then, write them? So you can go back in a year or two and read that and say "Wow! I don't feel that way anymore!"*

I made my list on an 8 1/2 x 11 sheet of unlined paper. I folded it in half to 8 1/2 x 5 1/2, turned it the long way and started a list of positive feelings on the left and positive thoughts on the right. I had lots of thoughts as I listened to the voices of my teachers, parents, husband, child, and a short list of feelings. I then turned it over and wrote on the other side all the negatives. I refolded the list in half—so I couldn't see the negatives but could see the positives, folded it in thirds so it would fit in my billfold. I had to take it everywhere with me! If I didn't have those positives in my head and heart, at least I could put them in my hand and read them silently or aloud.

3. *For a minute each day, say or write your positives. I suppose I wrote mine so no one would hear me. Thirteen years later Barbara decided to say and tally them. That works well also. Your choice. But you must do it each day for one minute. If you write them, aim for 30-35 per minute. If you say them, aim for 50 to 75 per minute. Don't worry if a positive slips in there more than once; you just don't want to say the same one over and over again!*

What's so critical about one minute? I don't know but I do know that over 1.2 million Standard Celeration Charts* tell us that behavior changes rapidly and securely with a one-minute timing.

What's so critical about every day? You learn best if you do something on a regular basis. If you're training for the Olympics or the high

school team, you don't train once a week. If you're taking music lessons, you don't practise weekly or monthly, or even every other day; you practise daily. When you learn to read, the teacher doesn't announce "Today is Monday and it's the day we read." You read every day.

If you want to learn to improve how you feel, you will practise saying or writing your good thoughts and feelings every day, preferably at about the same time of day.

4. *How many should I have each day? How soon will I reach my goal? How many should I have each day? If you write them, you can probably write between 30 and 40 in one minute. Aim for that and remember, just write the positive. You do not need or want complete sentences here! Just words. I even wrote "good piano mother dgtr sis [for sister] reader writer tea [for teacher] cook wife," i.e., I wrote the good only once and then listed the things I thought I was good at; abbreviations are fine. This is not for your English teacher; it's for you and no one else. I also did not glance back to see if I repeated myself. Of course, I didn't write the same item continuously, but I didn't pause to see if I had already written or even thought something. I wanted to get as many in as possible. If you think-then-say your positives, you'll not know for certain if you already said one. To say them, aim for between 50 and 75 in one minute. Of course, there's always someone like Janel who said 94 in one minute! Perhaps you're like Janel. Great! Neither Laura Morris, her learning coach, nor I, who developed this approach, can do that many. Frankly, I love it when my students learn to do something better than I.*

Rose Rodriguez has developed three lists of some 250 good aspects of a person. She developed these for those of us not yet ready to come up with our own list but who need prompts. You can mark them on the list or read them. So far,

* Standard Celeration Chart is a scientific term coined by Ogden R. Lindsley to describe the family of charts with an add scale across and six x10 multiply cycles (logarithmic) up the chart. Because of the design of these charts (the standard is the 34 degree angle of the doubling line), all accelerations and decelerations are standard. Behavior Research Company (Box 3351, Kansas City, KS 66103) has copyrighted and published the series of Standard Celeration Charts for minutes, days, weeks, months, and years. Lindsley has trade marked the term "Standard Change Chart" to describe general applications of the chart series.

we have used the “See then Mark” approach with people in the 11-15 age range.

How soon will I reach my goal? When you do the one-minute timing each day, you should double in a week. If you start on a Wednesday and have four in one minute, you should have eight in one minute the following Wednesday...and 16 the following Wednesday. When you get to your aim, keep doing it for at least a few more days to be sure you maintain this new habit of thinking well of yourself. If you come across a difficult moment, a self-doubting situation a year or more later, use the one-minute timing for a week or two to underline your good and high self-esteem. This will help carry you through this tough situation.

I have supervised well over 50-100 people counting thoughts and feelings. In addition to the one-minute-a-day, most have also counted good/bad, positive/negative, pleasant/unpleasant feelings and thoughts all day. (Call them what you want.) They have used golf counters, masking tape on the back of the hand, note cards, bead counters, notebooks to do the all-day counting.

Likewise, if you count all day, your positives should go up by doubling each week or your negatives cut in half each week. Better yet, the positives would go up and the negatives would go down!

Some people have some stubborn negatives, though. Not a problem. What are they? What is, or are, their opposites or contraries? Let's take one. I'm not pretty because I have a horrible nose. My father always said it looked like a bird's beak. Really?! You have a beautiful nose, straight from its bridge to its end. An elegant nose. Perhaps 39 friends have told you you have a beautiful face and 7 have said they like your nose, but you say they're lying. And I say, Kay, is this the father who abused you? Perhaps you should believe your friends. You are beautiful!

Or intelligent. I have learned very few people, especially women, feel intelligent. I put intelligent on my list for I was often told that. I knew they were lying to me. If they knew the real me, they'd never say I was intelligent. If they saw the inside...I believe you know the litany or you wouldn't be reading this! As I continued doing my

timings and counting my thoughts and feelings each day, I grew tired that “intelligent” was still the only one on the list I hadn't learned to feel. One morning, I decided I was going to sit at my desk until I felt intelligent! About 20 minutes later, I had this wash of “intelligent” flash through me, long enough to give me goose bumps but definitely less than one second. That's a feeling! The next day the feeling was longer... I called Susan, the most intelligent woman I knew in the area, to share this with her. I asked when was the first time she had felt intelligent. Softly, this also mid-thirties woman responded “I never have.” I recently heard her interviewed on NPR regarding some remarkable work she has done with children and music. I hope she feels intelligent now.

If you have one of those stubborn positive aspects that does not shine through or a negative that won't go away, focus on the positive itself or the positive as the opposite of the negative. Concentrate on the good point. Post it on the refrigerator or the inside of your closet door! Think it, think it, think it, until it is there in reality. How do you think the negative got there in the first place?! It didn't just arrive like a letter in the mail. Someone told you and you believed it and began to think it again and too many agains. Do the opposite now!

If you're still stuck, contact me through this web site but be sure to have at least four weeks of counting, including two weeks of the one-minute timings on your self-positives.

To use the one-minute timing on inner behavior is an extension of what we have been doing for over 30 years with school children and their academic learning. As Skinner often said, private events are difficult to observe but not different in kind from overt behavior. One-minute timings, sprints, and self-recording have all contributed to impressive growth in academic skills with tens of thousands of children. These same procedures work with private verbal behavior of children and adults. Why shouldn't we use them to improve our thoughts and feelings? To argue otherwise is to refute the canon of parsimony. Who would want that added to their list of negatives? Better to add careful, frugal, diligent to your list of positives!

