HAPPINESS

The Sun Will Come Up Tomorrow

Jim Petersen, PhD · June 17, 2026

And cardiology is catching up

A study published in Cardiology Clinics reached a conclusion I have spent the past several years thinking about: a positive psychological outlook is not a luxury, a personality quirk, or a soft leadership concept. It may be a measurable contributor to how well people live, and perhaps how long they live.

The research, led by Rosalba Hernandez of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, reviewed 18 randomized controlled trials of what researchers call positive psychological interventions in adults at risk of, or already living with, cardiovascular disease. These interventions were not exotic. They included gratitude exercises, identifying personal strengths, acts of kindness, optimism training, mindfulness-based practices, journaling, and structured exercises delivered over several weeks.

The findings were not soft. Participants showed improvements in cardiovascular risk factors and health behaviors after programs generally lasting six to twelve weeks. Some interventions reduced systolic blood pressure by 4 to 8 points, which Hernandez described as clinically significant. The researchers concluded that positive psychological resources such as optimism and emotional vitality are associated with lower cardiovascular morbidity and mortality, while also emphasizing that these practices should complement, not replace, medication, exercise, diet, and standard medical care.

That distinction matters. This is not a license to replace a cardiologist with a gratitude journal. It is evidence that the inner life and the physical life are more closely connected than many high performers want to admit.

I am a retired Navy Captain. I came up through the nuclear submarine force, where the standard of evidence required to act on a claim is uncompromising. I spent the next chapter of my career in financial planning, where the standard is similar: the data either supports the recommendation, or it does not. So when a review of randomized controlled trials finds that structured positive psychological practices can move cardiovascular risk factors in the right direction, I pay attention.

This is not wellness-industry mood music. It is another sign that cardiology, behavioral health, and leadership development are beginning to talk about the same human being.

Why this matters to the new book

My new book, The Sun Will Come Up Tomorrow, addresses the part of life and leadership that too many people postpone: happiness, fulfillment, and the disciplined choice to keep moving forward.

The premise of the book is simple, and it puts me at odds with a lot of leadership literature: fulfillment is not what you get after you lead well. It is part of how you lead well.

Too many leaders treat joy as a retirement benefit. They tell themselves they will enjoy life after the next promotion, after the next business milestone, after the children are grown, after the company is sold, after the deployment, after the deal, after the crisis.

Then “after” arrives, and they discover they never built the inner habits required to enjoy it.

The Hernandez study gives scientific weight to a message that runs through the book: optimism, gratitude, emotional vitality, learning, relationships, and purpose are not decorative qualities. They are trainable disciplines. They shape how people think, lead, recover, decide, and live.

The trap high performers fall into

In forty years of coaching executives, financial advisors, senior leaders, and military officers transitioning into civilian life, I have watched one pattern repeat itself.

High performers often build their identities around grit, endurance, and the willingness to absorb pain. They wear stress like a medal. They confuse cynicism with sophistication. They call optimism naïve. They tell themselves the worry is what keeps them sharp.

It works, until it does not.

The marriage frays. The health scare arrives. The retirement they spent forty years funding becomes a season of anxiety rather than freedom. The portfolio is ready, but the person is not. They have resources, but not rhythm. They have success, but not peace.

This is why I take the new research personally. The study is not saying that a positive attitude magically prevents disease. It is saying something more practical and more useful: structured positive psychological practices can improve measurable risk factors and behaviors, especially when practiced frequently and sustained over time.

That is exactly how leadership development works. One speech rarely changes a leader. One retreat rarely changes a culture. One good intention rarely changes a life.

Practice changes people.

What the study actually suggests

This is the part I want every executive who has ever rolled their eyes at “gratitude journaling” to hear.

The interventions in these trials were not vague. They were structured. They were repeated. They were delivered through homework, journaling, digital tools, group sessions, telephone sessions, or hybrid formats. Most lasted several weeks, often six to twelve weeks, with repeated practice between sessions.

In other words: brief, frequent, sustained practice.

Not a weekend retreat.

Not an inspirational quote on Monday morning.

Not pretending everything is fine.

A practice.

That matters because leaders already understand disciplined repetition in every other area. They accept it in physical fitness. They accept it in financial planning. They accept it in military readiness. They accept it in sales training, compliance, and execution.

But when it comes to happiness and fulfillment, many people still want a shortcut.

There is no shortcut. Fulfillment, like fitness, responds to repetition and dose.

The Petersen Leadership Framework view

In the Petersen Leadership Framework, Character, Style, and Judgment form the core triangle. They are the qualities others see and feel when they encounter you as a leader. Culture and Execution describe how those qualities scale through an organization.

The Sun Will Come Up Tomorrow adds the dimension that sits at the center of all the others: Happiness and Fulfillment.

For years, this was the hardest part to write about because the evidence base often seemed softer than the other dimensions. Character has centuries of moral philosophy behind it. Leadership style has decades of research and assessment. Judgment has cognitive science, decision theory, and hard-earned experience behind it. Culture and execution have business literature, military doctrine, and organizational case studies.

Happiness and fulfillment were too often treated as personal preference.

That is changing.

When positive psychological interventions are shown to affect cardiovascular risk factors, emotional vitality stops being merely inspirational. It becomes practical. It becomes

developmental. It becomes something leaders can model, teach, and build into the rhythms of their teams.

The broader pattern

The Hernandez paper is not alone. The LiveNOW article also referenced Arthur Brooks and the long-running Harvard Study of Adult Development, which has emphasized habits associated with happier and healthier lives, including lifelong learning, skilled problem solving, and strong relationships.

Notice the pattern.

Learning is a practice.

Problem solving is a practice.

Friendship is a practice.

Marriage is a practice.

Gratitude is a practice.

Optimism is a practice.

Fulfillment is a practice.

None of these are accidents. None of them are merely personality traits. They are built through repeated choices.

That is the message of The Sun Will Come Up Tomorrow. The sun coming up tomorrow is not just a comforting phrase. It is a way of living. It is the decision to keep learning, keep loving, keep adjusting, keep contributing, and keep believing that the next day deserves your best.

What to do Monday morning

For leaders, this study points to several practical steps.

First, treat your psychological resources the way you treat your physical resources. Pay attention to them. Develop them. Do not wait until they break.

Second, stop treating optimism as something people either have or do not have. The research reviewed interventions that helped adults practice these skills. That means optimism can be strengthened. Gratitude can be practiced. Emotional vitality can be cultivated.

Third, build the practice into the calendar, not the mood. The evidence points toward frequency and duration. A person does not become physically fit by exercising only when inspired. The same appears to be true for the inner life.

Fourth, recognize that fulfillment is upstream of performance, not downstream of it. The best

leaders I have known did not defer joy until the mission was complete. They carried purpose, humor, gratitude, and perspective into the mission itself.

The sun will come up tomorrow.

That is not merely a hope.

It is a discipline.

It is a leadership practice.

And increasingly, the research suggests it may also be good for the heart.

James A. Petersen, PhD, is a retired U.S. Navy Captain, CEO of Diversified Professional Coaching, President of the Professional Business Coaches Alliance, and adjunct professor at The American College of Financial Services. His new book, The Sun Will Come Up Tomorrow, explores happiness, fulfillment, resilience, and the disciplined choice to keep moving forward.