

# A Wonderland Journey Through Positive Psychology Interventions

A review of the film



**Alice in Wonderland**

(2010)

Tim Burton (Director)



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Reviewed by

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The latest version of *Alice in Wonderland* is a strikingly creative film directed by Tim Burton. It builds from the 1951 Disney classic film, and though it is a continuation of the classic story in many respects, it is also a unique tale in its own right. Familiar characters from the animated classic appear—Absolom the Caterpillar, the Cheshire Cat, the White Rabbit, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and the mad tea party companions.

But Alice is now a 19-year-old, and she must decide whether she wants to accept the marriage proposal of Hamish, the son of a lord. As she wanders away from the engagement party to reflect on the proposal, her curiosity leads her down the rabbit hole into Wonderland (referred to in this film as Underland). While there have been numerous remakes of the film from a number of countries and countless films that have modeled plotlines and themes from the original, such as the recent *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and *The Imaginarium of Doctor*

*Parnassus* (2009), Burton's version is superior in creativity and depth, as well as most resonant with the themes of positive psychology.

Interest in positive psychology has exploded over the last 12 years, attracting neophyte and veteran researchers and practitioners to study what is best and strongest about people. Burton's film provides an arena in which to discuss the research, practice, and emerging science-based interventions from the field of positive psychology that a practitioner might adapt in the clinical setting.

The connection between positive psychology, character strengths research and practice, and contemporary cinema has been discussed at length elsewhere (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008), as has the use of films in the psychotherapy process (Berg-Cross, Jennings, & Baruch, 1990; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003). These connections are clearly evident in *Alice in Wonderland*, and Burton's film illustrates a number of positive interventions that have empirical support. These interventions are based on the VIA classification of 24 strengths and six virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) that have been found to be universal across cultures and nations (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). Character strengths such as zest, perseverance, love, gratitude, fairness, teamwork, kindness, hope, humility, and self-regulation compose many of the basic psychological elements of what is best about human beings.

## **Recover Your Muchness**

In the film, Alice builds her courage, strives to be authentic, and uses her signature strengths such as creativity and curiosity to recover her "muchness." It is an overarching theme and directly connects to the personal meaning and growth that Alice derives from her journey. These points will each be addressed as interventions.

## **Become a Divergent Thinker**

From a young age, Alice was encouraged by her father to think of six impossible things before breakfast. Alice has retained this quirky habit into her young adulthood and displays it throughout the film either directly (e.g., she uses these skills at crucial moments in her fight with the monstrous Jabberwocky) or indirectly in her fantasies (e.g., most of Underland is ongoing imagery of impossible things). Divergent thinking such as what Alice displays has been found to be one of the core processes of creative thought (along with problem solving, critical thinking, and convergent thinking) and also to be an important component of effective creativity training programs (Scott, Leritz, & Mumford, 2004).

By thinking of many impossible things, Alice creates possibilities; she is creating multiple pathways or solutions to potential problems. Her displays of this technique become even more striking when juxtaposed with the stuffy Hamish's one-dimensional approach to problems—an approach that critiques, controls, and stifles creativity and curiosity.

## **Develop Active Curiosity**

Curiosity, like creativity, is one of the 24 character strengths from the VIA classification of strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This strength involves exploration and attraction toward novelty, which lead to the development of new knowledge. It is likely that curiosity and creativity are Alice's signature strengths (i.e., top strengths that come naturally, are core to who she is, are energizing, are identified by family and friends, and are readily expressed across settings). Kashdan (2009) has emphasized the importance of developing an *active* curiosity in which one actively explores internal and external environments with interest, rather than a *passive* curiosity, in which one notices novelty only when it is immediately apparent (e.g., a sunset or a butterfly suddenly swooping by).

Active curiosity is associated with a number of benefits such as longer life, better relationships, and the development of higher intelligence (Kashdan, 2009). The curiosity trait is also associated with greater life satisfaction and meaning in life (Kashdan & Steger, 2007). Alice's patent line, "curiouser and curiouser," which she says as she is exploring her environment, reflects the epitome of her character and of the curiosity strength. Indeed, it is her curiosity that leads her down the rabbit hole and subsequently leads her to deep insights and growth.

## **Use Strategies to Manifest Bravery**

Character strengths are expressed to different degrees depending on the context or situation. Alice is courageous in some situations and is avoidant and fearful in other situations. She displays the antithesis of bravery when she avoids or escapes from her fears and from difficult situations (e.g., when she runs from the group of family onlookers who are waiting for her response to the marriage proposal and when she repeatedly denies that she is the one who must battle the Jabberwocky).

But at other times she displays degrees of bravery by directly facing her fears, such as when she directs the bloodhound to take her to the Red Queen's castle so that she can save the Mad Hatter. Nevertheless, the Mad Hatter summarizes his assessment of Alice as someone who has "lost her muchness" since the last time he saw her; in other words, she has lost her character strength of bravery and is not being true to who she is. Pury (2008)

documented that most people have tried to activate their courage/bravery at one time or another.

The most common strategy people use is to become outcome focused, a strategy in which one thinks of the person being helped, of the goodness of the action, or about the obligation to act. Less common but still useful strategies are becoming emotion focused (keeping a positive focus; reminding oneself why there is no need to fear; receiving encouragement) and being problem focused (mental rehearsal; reminding oneself of one's training). Alice displays a number of these strategies throughout the film, such as thinking of the person she wants to help (the Mad Hatter), receiving encouragement from Absolem the Caterpillar and others, and reminding herself of her abilities.

## **Explore and Uncover Who You Are**

Identity is a core issue in the film. The wise Absolem frequently asks Alice, between puffs of smoke he blows in her face, "Who are you?" He is never satisfied with her answer, seeming to want deeper self-examination. Various characters refer to her as "the wrong Alice," "hardly Alice," and "almost Alice" as she progresses in the adventures of her Underland journey.

As a young woman, Alice is developing her core sense of self and coming to terms with her essence, or true character (Niemiec, 2010). This is something that must be discovered by the individual, but Alice is repeatedly told whom she must be. The process of self-development involves awareness, exploration, and self-discovery rather than overt instruction and direction by others.

An intervention that a practitioner can use that is consistent with this approach is to encourage the client to become aware of his or her own signature strengths and to explore these strengths by using them in new and unique ways each day. Research has found that this approach increases happiness and decreases depression, with effects lasting for six months compared with placebo and other positive interventions (Rust, Diessner, & Reade, 2009; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

At the end of her adventure, Alice indeed recovers her muchness. She stands up for herself by refusing to marry someone despite pressure from family and friends, she displays courage by going into battle and entering a lethal creature's den to get a sword, she uses her character strengths to help others, and she emerges as an authentic woman. Her journey to recover her muchness is also about her developing into a heroine. Heroism is sometimes defined in

terms of a combination of courage, honesty, and empathy (Staats, Hupp, & Hagley, 2008). Alice shows empathy by giving a creature its eye back, honesty in answering incessant questioning by various creatures, and bravery in the aforementioned acts, culminating in the slaying of the Jabberwocky.

Alice's emergence as a heroine is not only about helping others but also about identity, autonomy, competence, and self-development. This theme is sealed with a metaphor during the film's closing credits as a variety of plants and flowers slowly unfold and grow from buds into blossoms, paralleling what the viewer has witnessed. Alice has indeed become "the right Alice."

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