“Let’s do three good things.” This is a statement that I hear with some regularity in my life. It comes from my boyfriend, who has loved and tolerated me for eight wonderfully long years. He spent many years in the military prior to meeting me. I have surmised that positive psychology has made a great impact on his life, allowing him to cope with both past and present stressors. He says that the “three good things” exercise came from his military training as a part of a course aimed at providing resiliency skills. He took the exercises learned in this course and adapted them into a routine that he has shared with not only myself, but many others in our lives. He finds great joy in building up the resiliency of those around him, and as a result many of our friends and colleagues have also become accustomed to the familiar refrain – “Let’s do three good things”.

For a while I thought it was just one of his “things,” a remnant of his days in the military. It turns out that “three good things” is an actual “thing” and comes out of the positive psychology movement. Positive psychology surfaced in the late 1990s when Martin Seligman, then president of the American Psychological Association, took stock of the profession as a whole and found that while the treatment of mental illness had improved over the 20th century, there was a paucity of scientifically sound tools to help people thrive and flourish. Positive psychology has since become an established branch of psychology. The “three good things” exercise seems to have come out of this movement, and has even been studied in a handful of trials. Seligman et al. (2005) compared five different happiness exercises to a placebo and measured the impact on happiness and depression scales. The “three good things” exercise was one of two exercises that significantly increased happiness symptoms and decreased depressive symptoms following a one week intervention, with effects lasting until the final follow-up at 6 months. Mongrain and Anselmo-Matthews (2012) replicated portions of this study and found similar improvements in happiness symptoms.
THREE GOOD THINGS
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For us, “doing three good things” goes a little something like this. Everyone takes turns describing three good things about their day, typically in round-robin fashion. The goal, and often the point as we describe it to newcomers, is to find three good things about every single day. This is in spite of, or often more importantly because of, bad days that seemed to have nothing good. I’ve sat around a table of colleagues and their significant others after one of “those days”. You know those days – the ones where you don’t know if you want to cry or scream at the end of it. Those days where you might even say “That’s it, I’m done, I quit!” I’ve sat around a table full of people who just had “that” day, and to see, and feel, what a difference the “three good things” exercise can make for everyone at that table, what a difference it could make for myself – well I was sold. We would sit down at that table angry, scowling, and cursing; we would leave laughing, perhaps even feeling like “that” day was not so bad after all.

Over time, “three good things” has become quite the “thing” in my life as well. It has been passed on to my family, my friends, my colleagues, and so on. Most recently we passed it on to emergency medicine residents from Tanzania while attending an emergency medicine conference in Rwanda. Those we shared the exercise with have spread it even further, to their friends and their colleagues. We certainly cannot take credit for “three good things” as an original idea, but I love how impactful it has been on those we’ve introduced to it, and how we have been able to pass it on – it has made me a believer. I won’t suggest that we should use the “three good things” exercise, or any of the other resiliency building exercises found in the positive psychology literature, to place an inadequate Band-Aid over the real problems, such as the infuriating systems within which we work that contribute to our burnout. Our wellness demands that we address the root problems instead of simply covering them up. But even if we fixed our broken system, and all of our patients were nice, and we suddenly had equal pay and promotion opportunities regardless of our gender or color – our parents would still get sick, our dogs would still die, our children would still leave home for college, and our relationships would still go through difficult times. Positive psychology and resilience are not just about getting through a day at work or your career – it’s about getting through life. “Life... It’s a great and terrible and short and endless thing. None of us come out of it alive (Cecilia Ahern)”. But maybe, just maybe, we can get through it with a little more joy and with gratitude. Let’s do three good things.
