

## Positive Psychology

An Interview with Samantha Boardman, MD

**EDITORS' NOTE** Dr. Samantha Boardman is a New York City based psychiatrist, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Clinical Instructor in Medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College, founder of PositivePrescription.com, and author of Everyday Vitality. She received a BA from Harvard University, an MD from Cornell University Medical College, and completed a four-year residency program in Psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College where she was awarded the Oskar Diethelm Prize for Excellence in Psychiatry.



Samantha Boardman

She earned a master's degree in applied positive psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Boardman is also a Distinguished Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association and currently serves as Co-Chair of The Positive Psychiatry Section for the World Psychiatric Association. Her work has been published in The American Journal of Psychiatry, The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, Translational Neuroscience, and Nature Reviews Neuroscience. She is a frequent contributor to Psychology Today, The Wall Street Journal, and Thrive Global, and a guest on the TODAY Show and Good Day New York. Dr. Boardman serves on the board of trustees at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Citymeals-on-Wheels, Let Grow, The Chapin School, and Millbrook School.

**Will you discuss your career path, and did you know at an early age that you wanted to pursue a career in psychiatry?**

I was initially drawn to psychiatry because I was drawn to the big questions in life like: What does it all mean? What is a good life? What good can I do in it? I had always loved hearing other people's stories and understanding what made them tick. During my formal training, the focus shifted away from those existential topics and honed in on symptom

management and diagnosis. I was trained in pathogenesis – the study of disease, not salutogenesis – the creation of health. One day a patient I'd been seeing for a few months came in and said to me, "Dr. Boardman, all we do is talk about the bad stuff going on in my life. I'm done." And she was. That was our last session. It was also a turning point in my life. Her words stung, but she was right. Admittedly, I had not focused on much else. I was well versed in dialing down misery, but knew little about factors that promote well-being or enable a good day. I decided to go back to school to get a master's degree in positive psychology – the study of positive human functioning. In the program, I studied

resilience, optimism, and post-traumatic growth. I learned about lifestyle and psychosocial factors that improve overall well-being. It was essentially the opposite of what I had learned in medical school. Studying positive psychology enabled me to think more expansively about what it means to feel mentally strong and healthy.

**Will you highlight your work around resilience building by combining conventional medicine with positive psychology?**

Today, I think of myself as a positive psychiatrist, concerned equally with promoting positive mental health and with fixing my patients' problems. In my clinical practice, I value well-being and resilience as much as pathology identification and symptom reduction. I believe vitality is an important component of well-being and is the heart of everyday resilience. I also believe that vitality is a skill that can be learned and practiced. In many cases my advice runs counter to conventional wisdom. The contemporary emphasis on self-focus flies in the face of research that meaningful connections and other-oriented actions are what fortify us. We are told to live in the moment, seek pleasure, and avoid discomfort of all kinds. What helps us feel moored in the rushing stream of life is when we're learning, growing, and challenging ourselves.

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**What makes some people more resilient than others?**

The key that unlocks resilience is a flexible mindset. George Bonanno's research from Columbia University has shown that being optimistic, having a challenge orientation, i.e. the ability to see negative experiences as opportunities for growth, and confidence in one's ability to cope promote resiliency. It's also important to understand that resilience is not a one-person show or something that people either have or lack. The communities we belong to and our perception of support have a tremendous impact on our ability to adapt to challenges.

**What advice do you offer to people about the ways to focus more on their own mental health?**

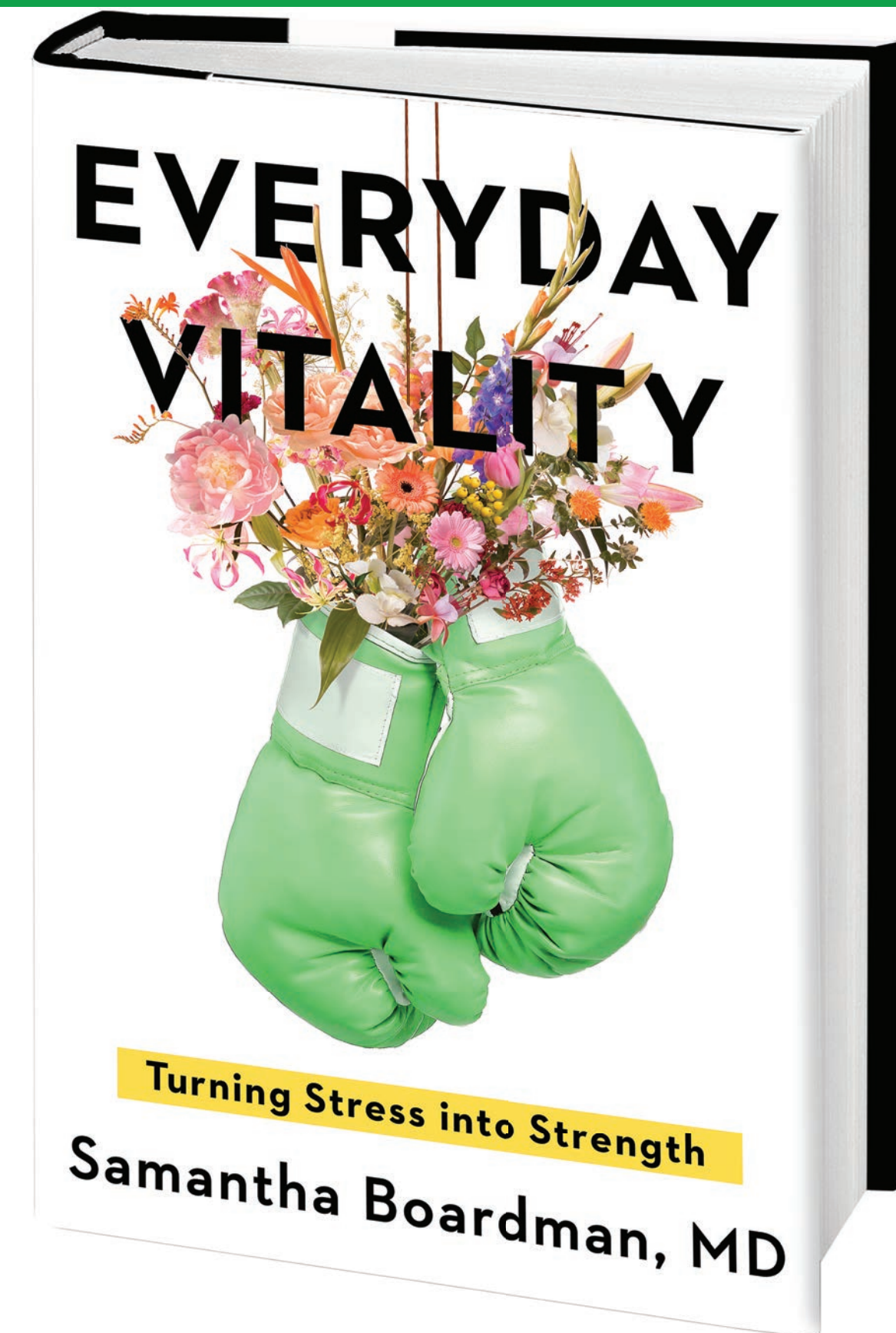
Be deliberate about it. Well-being is not something that happens to us – we have to be thoughtful and intentional about it every single day. Decide to decide about what matters to you and make the choice to embody these values on a daily basis. Actively engage in behaviors that make you feel strong – be deliberate about what you eat, about exercise, and about sleep. Pursue meaningful uplifts. Go out of your way to treat others with respect and kindness. Be intentional with your attention. Override the urge to do what's easy but empty. Embrace opportunities to explore and expand. Overrule the impulse to avoid challenges and retreat. Savor meaningful moments and share them with others. Seek and generate moments of felt love. Be actively generous. Resist the temptation to fixate on what's wrong or who has wronged you. It sounds like a lot, but the more your actions align with your values, the more vitality you will have.

**How concerned are you about mental and emotional health challenges caused by the pandemic?**

The pandemic had varied effects on well-being. As the saying goes, we were all in the same storm, but not in the same boat. What concerns me most is the mental health crisis in teens and children that began long before the pandemic. Depression and anxiety have been rising in this population for over a decade, and especially in girls. In 2019, 13 percent of adolescents reported having a major depressive episode, a 60 percent increase from 2007. Emergency room visits for self-harm increased very rapidly among teen girls beginning in 2010. And for people ages 10 to 24, suicide rates, stable from 2000 to 2007, leaped nearly 60 percent by 2018, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. There is no doubt in my mind that social media is contributing to this picture.

**Your paperback edition of *Everyday Vitality* launched last year. What interested you in writing the book and what are the key messages you wanted to convey?**

In the book, I tackle a lot of myths about happiness and introduce counterintuitive and accessible ways to boost well-being. For many years I believed that happiness was an inside job and up to the individual. Drawing from research and experience, I show how the most reliable wellsprings of happiness lie beyond the self. Everyday well-being resides not just in the



head, but in the actions we take, the connections we make, and how we participate. The book provides a step-by-step guide to how to tell the difference between what is urgent versus what is important.

**How important has resilience been in your own life?**

Big R resilience is about bouncing back from a major life event, such as divorce or the death of a loved one, that are thankfully relatively rare.

It's also important to focus on little r resilience. This is the resilience that enables us to deal with the daily grind. Balancing hassles with uplifts is always on my "to do" list. These days I make a point of cultivating or noticing at least two ordinary moments each day that are uplifting. If I'm not deliberate about seeking delight, I might miss it. Intentionally bringing the unseen and the underappreciated into view leaves an imprint of grace, goodness, and gratitude. ●