

Positive Psychology for mental health

Introduction

Psychology has, since World War II, become a science mostly about healing. It focuses on repairing damage within a disease model of human functioning. This almost exclusive concentration to pathology neglects the fulfilled individual and the thriving community.¹ In one metaphor, psychology was said to be learning how to bring people up from negative eight to zero but not as good at understanding how people rise from zero to positive eight.²

In this spectrum, the field of positive psychology has been initiated and flourished the last 2 decades. The field is founded on the belief that people can, want and should lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of life, love and work.³

This online course is dedicated to positive psychology, as well as its key elements. It serves as an opportunity for helping our young people (and every individual) to explore their full potential and to enable them to lead meaningful lives in a flourishing community!

Enjoy it!



¹ Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000)

² Gamble & Haidt (2005)

³<https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/>

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions.⁴

In the past decade, psychologists have become concerned with prevention. How can psychologists prevent problems like depression or substance abuse or schizophrenia in young people who are genetically vulnerable or who live in worlds that nurture these problems? How can psychologists prevent murderous schoolyard violence in children who have access to weapons, poor parental supervision, and a mean streak? What psychologists have learned over 50 years is that the disease model does not move psychology closer to the prevention of these serious problems. Indeed, the major strides in prevention have come largely from a perspective focused on systematically building competency, not on correcting weakness.

Prevention researchers have discovered that there are human strengths that act as buffers against mental illness: courage, future mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skill, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, and the capacity for flow and insight, to name several. Much of the task of prevention in this new century will be to create a science of human strength whose mission will be to understand and learn how to foster these virtues in young people.

Working exclusively on personal weakness and on damaged brains, however, has rendered science poorly equipped to effectively prevent illness. Psychologists need now to call for massive research on human strengths and virtues. Practitioners need to recognize that much of the best work they already do in the consulting room is to amplify strengths rather than repair the weaknesses of their clients. Psychologists working with families, schools, religious communities, and corporations, need to develop climates that foster these strengths. The major psychological theories have changed to undergird a new science of strength and resilience. No longer do the dominant theories view the individual as a passive vessel responding to stimuli; rather, individuals are now seen as decision makers, with choices, preferences, and the possibility of becoming masterful, efficacious, or in malignant circumstances, helpless and hopeless. Science and practice that rely on this worldview may have the direct effect of preventing many of the major emotional disorders. They may also have two side effects: They may make the lives of clients physically healthier, given all that psychologists are learning about the effects of mental wellbeing on the body. This science and practice will also reorient psychology back to its two neglected missions-- making normal people stronger and more productive and making high human potential actual.⁵

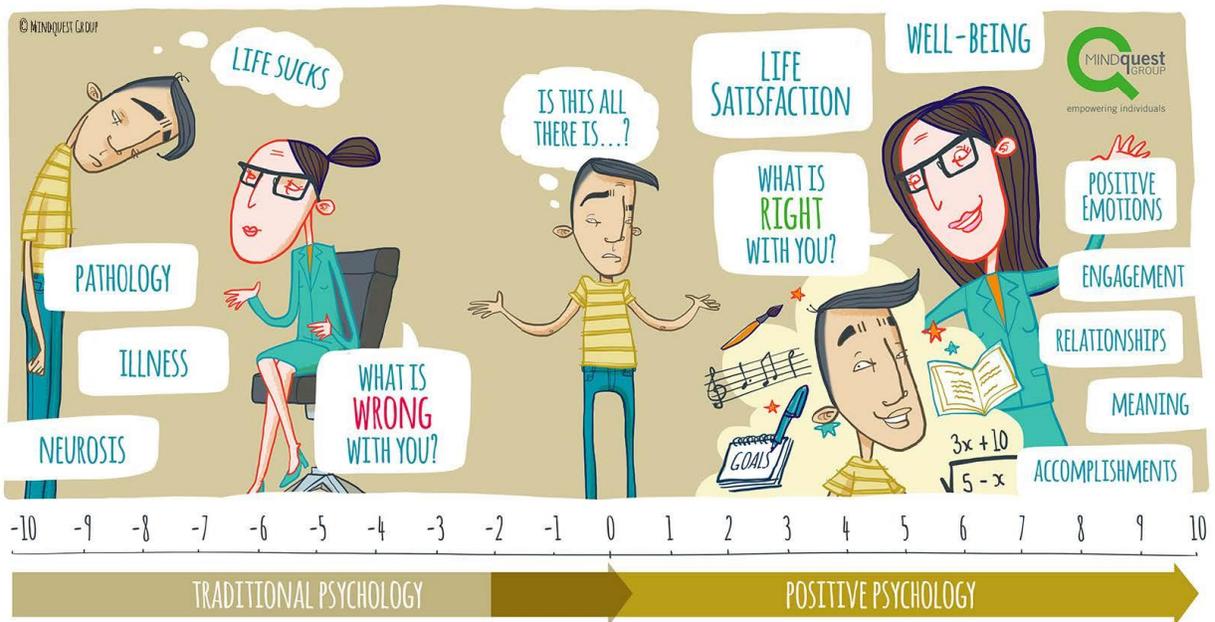
⁴ Gamble & Haidt (2005)

⁵ Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000)

The aim of positive psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities. The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love, courage, interpersonal skill, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic.⁶

Having this in mind, one can say that positive psychology builds the capacities of the community, by helping individuals develop basic but fundamental competences that are neglected in the 21st century lives and educational systems. These competences include the ability to be authentic, grateful, joyful, resilient, mindful, happy and many more!

Positive psychology and the regular psychology



Positive psychology does not imply that the rest of psychology is negative, although it is understandable that the name may imply that to some people. In fact, the large majority of the gross academic product of psychology is neutral, focusing on neither wellbeing nor distress. Positive psychology grew largely from the recognition of an imbalance in clinical psychology, in

⁶ Seligman (2000)

which most research does indeed focus on mental illness. Researchers in cognitive, developmental, social, and personality psychology may not believe that things are so out of balance.

Despite these inequities, positive psychology's aim is not the denial of the distressing, unpleasant, or negative aspects of life, nor is it an effort to see them through rose-colored glasses. Those who study topics in positive psychology fully acknowledge the existence of human suffering, selfishness, dysfunctional family systems, and ineffective institutions. But the aim of positive psychology is to study the other side of the coin—the ways that people feel joy, show altruism, and create healthy families and institutions—thereby addressing the full spectrum of human experience. Moreover, positive psychology makes the argument that these positive topics of inquiry are important to understand in their own right, not solely as buffers against the problems, stressors, and disorders of life (although we believe the evidence is clear that many positive processes shield us from negative outcomes, a point we return to later). Sheldon and King (2001) defined positive psychology as “nothing more than the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues,” one that “revisits the average person” (p. 216; italics added). In this definition is the acknowledgment that our field as a whole is relatively silent regarding what is typical, because what is typical is positive.⁷

⁷ Gamble & Haidt (2005)