

WHAT IS POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY?

It is about improving our well-being. Positive psychology is a move away from psychology's traditional focus on mental ill health human weaknesses. Instead it is a celebration of all that is positive about human beings.

Positive Psychology is:

- About emphasising positive human emotions and traits
- Showing us how to live in the upper reaches of our set happiness range
- Showing us how to create more positive and productive relationships/environments

Positive Emotions Can Help Us Live Longer

A famous longitudinal study was carried out with 187 Nuns (chosen because their home environments and lives are very similar) and the study found that:

- 90% of the 'most cheerful' quarter were still alive at the age of 85 versus 35% of the least cheerful quarter.
- 54% of the 'most cheerful' quarter were still alive at age 94 as opposed to 11% of the 'least cheerful' quarter.

Optimistic people explain good events to themselves, in terms of, traits and abilities e.g. I got that promotion because I am good at what I do. Pessimists tend to explain things in terms of mood and effort e.g. I got that promotion because the boss was in a good mood.

POSITIVE EMOTION CAN AFFECT YOUR WELLBEING

There are 2 different kinds of human smiles i.e. the pan American smile- named after air stewardesses with false smiles? The other kind of smile is named after its discoverer and this is a duchenne smile. This is a smile where the corners of your mouth turn up and your eyes crinkle into crow's feet. This produces a warm and authentic smile. The muscles that control this kind of smile are very difficult to control voluntarily and any attempt to fake it will probably finish up looking more like a grimace. The duchenne smile is viewed as an outward display of positive emotion. Interestingly, research has found that:

- Duchenne smiling women were more likely to be married, remain married and experience a higher level of personal wellbeing.

- Duchenne smile indicates authenticity and positive emotion- not related to attractiveness.

Do you remember someone smiling at you recently, where you thought, 'they don't mean that'?

HAPPINESS LEVELS

We all have a set range of happiness which tends to be static and which varies from one individual to another so some people habitually feel happier than others. For a long time, it was believed that this could not be changed but positive psychology research has demonstrated that we can change our happiness levels

Would You Prefer To Be Happier or Richer?

- Rich people are, on average, only slightly happier than poorer people
- Recent changes in an individual's salary predict job satisfaction but average levels of pay do not
- Physical attractiveness/health has little impact on happiness levels
- Major event e.g. being fired lose their impact on happiness levels after 3 months

Materialism does not bring about happiness which is a problem for those organisations who think that paying people extortionate sums of money will keep them happy.

Research has been carried out on the happiness levels of lottery winners and it was found that the win did increase their happiness levels in the short term but after one year all the lottery winners studied reverted to the happiness level that they experienced prior to the lottery win. This suggests that if money does not engage and motivate people in the long term, then organisations need to look at alternative strategies for keeping their employees happy and engaged.

WE ALL USE SHORTCUTS TO HAPPINESS

Watching TV, retail therapy, chocolate, drugs, alcohol are all examples of the shortcuts that we use to make ourselves happy and that is why there are so many apparently wealthy people who appear to have everything but are living in spiritual poverty. But 'positive emotion' that arises without the exercise of character is **inauthentic** and leads to feelings of frustration and, emptiness and depression. Research suggests that the positive feeling that we get from using our strengths and virtues is real happiness and more authentic e.

Committing an act of kindness for someone else gives us a warm positive feeling that is authentic and it is suggested that we are in a state of 'flow' when we carry out kind acts but we will go on to talk about 'Flow' later.

Have you committed an act of kindness recently?

SIGNATURE STRENGTHS

There are six virtues which are endorsed across every major religion and cultural tradition and these are: Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Love and Humanity, Justice, Temperance, Spirituality and Transcendence. Twenty four signature strengths have been derived from these virtues and positive psychology suggests that some strengths are more characteristic of us than others and some strengths can be displayed many times every day e.g. kindness whereas others will be displayed less frequently due to their nature e.g. valour. So, we will each have a core set of these strengths that are individual to us and they are our signature strengths. Seligman suggests that there is no point in trying to improve our weaknesses (which is often the subject of appraisal discussions). Our greatest happiness, wellbeing and success comes from building and using our signature strengths. The signature strengths are:

Signature Strengths

- Curiosity/Interest in the World
- Love and Humanity
- Justice
- Temperance
- Spirituality and transcendence
- world
- Love of learning
- Judgment/critical thinking/open-mindedness
- Ingenuity/Originality
- Social/Emotional intelligence
- Perspective
- Gratitude
- Hope/Optimism/future- mindedness
- Spirituality/Sense of purpose
- Forgiveness and Mercy
- Playfulness and humour
- Zest/Passion/Enthusiasm
- Valour and Bravery
- Perseverance/Industriousness
- Integrity/ Honesty
- Kindness/Generosity
- Loving and being loved
- Teamwork/Loyalty
- Fairness/Equity
- Leadership/Self Control

- Prudence/Discretion
- Humility/Modesty
- Appreciation of beauty and excellence

IMPROVING OUR HAPPINESS LEVELS

How then can we increase our levels of happiness and/or learn to operate at the upper reaches of our happiness range?

We Should

- Identify our signature strengths
- Put ourselves in positions where we use those strengths as often as possible during each and every day
- Change the balance of negative to positive thoughts so that we are being positive more than we are being negative
- Be Grateful- count our blessings
- Be kind – look for ways to help others

Positive Emotions help build resilience and maintain our happiness in the long term and our wellbeing. The overall balance of people's negative and positive thoughts have been shown to contribute to their subjective wellbeing. Positive emotions produce optimal functioning and we should work to cultivate positive emotions in ourselves and others as a means to achieving psychological growth and improved psychological/physical health/engagement.

Negative emotions e.g. fear sadness and anger are an evolutionary response; they are our first line of defence. They tend to make us intolerant and encourage us to look for win/lose scenarios as opposed to zero sum outcomes. When we are in a positive mood, people like us better and relationships are likely to cement. We are open to new ideas and experiences. Positive emotion leads to better commerce.

THE EXPERIENCE OF FLOW

Positive psychology suggests that we all have our individual signature strengths and that we are happiest when we are using our strengths and virtues. This can lead to the experience of 'flow'.

Flow is:

- Being totally absorbed in what you are doing
- Forgetting what time it is or how long you have been working on that task
- Forgetting to eat or drink or go to the loo

- Feeling calm but energised and creative

'Flow has its origins in eastern philosophy like mindfulness and Zen. It has been a popular concept in the arts and sport psychology for some time. You have probably all seen American films where they talk about 'being in the zone', this is what flow feels like. There are certain factors that are generally required in order to achieve a state of flow. Flow does not last all day but if we are lucky we may have several periods of flow during the course of a day. Flow is essentially about gaining control of our consciousness and being able to shut out distractions.

THE EXPERIENCE OF FLOW REQUIRES

- A challenging activity that requires skills
- Clear goals and feedback
- Concentration on the task at hand
- A sense of control
- Loss of self-consciousness
- Transformation of time

FACILITATING ENGAGEMENT/'FLOW' AND BUILDING ORGANISATIONAL RESISTANCE

Most people spend a large part of their lives in work and if we could facilitate more flow experiences we could make work more enjoyable and facilitate better wellbeing for employees and greater engagement.

Facilitating 'Flow'/Engagement and Well-Being

- Identify and use the signature strengths of staff
- Create an environment that fosters positive emotions
- Ensure that people have control over their work
- Ensure that people have access to immediate feedback
- Teach the skills of mindfulness/Resilience

Positive emotions undo negative emotions which means that even if organisational emotional levels are negative you can overcome this by facilitating more positive emotion not by trying to reduce the negative emotion.

Building positive emotions helps build resilience to stress and mental ill health e.g. teaching 10yr olds the skills of positive thinking cuts depression by half when they go through puberty. Just

imagine what your organisation would be like if you could raise the levels of positive emotion. You would have more good cheer, less sickness absence, higher levels of well-being and greater creativity/problem solving behaviours.

USES OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

- Career Guidance - positive psychology can be used in career guidance for both young people and adults to help them choose careers that will be satisfying and ensure good psychological health.
- Building resilience – positive psychology principles can be used to build both individual and organisational resilience
- Coaching - psychologists use strengths based coaching to help people make decisions in their lives which will increase their levels of happiness and well-being.
- Increasing well-being and engagement - companies are increasingly looking at positive psychology to help them create healthy and happy environments and facilitate employee wellbeing and engagement.