

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY : STRESS AND COPING

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Recent societal changes have brought, not only numerous resources of comfort, but also overabundance of demands that tax human body and mind. Now-a-days everyone talks about stress. It is cutting across all socio-economic groups of population; not only just high pressure executives are its key victims but it also includes labourers, slum dwellers, working women, businessmen, professionals and even children. Stress is an inevitable and unavoidable component of life due to increasing complexities and competitiveness in living standards. This paper highlights the importance of positive psychology for healthy and happy life of human beings. Positive psychology is a new attempt to redefine and readjust the existing disparity or imbalance, to encourage and support people to try and attempt to contribute to positive aspects of human life. It focuses on what constitutes the type of life for human beings that leads to the greatest sense of well-being, satisfaction or contentment, and the good life.

INTRODUCTION

Positive psychology, which was grounded as a new area of psychology by Martin Seligman (1998), provides many useful tools that promote good mental health. The goal of positive psychology is to enhance basic human strengths such as optimism, courage, honesty, self-understanding and interpersonal skills, instead of focusing on "the broken things" and on repairing the damage of past traumas. Positive psychology includes helping individuals and organizations identify their strengths and use them to increase and sustain their respective levels of well-being. Positive emotions and adaptive coping strategies can help to fight problems rather than focusing on negative emotions, internal conflicts, and anxieties.

Positive psychology is about scientifically informed perspectives on what makes life worth living. It focuses on aspects of the human condition that lead to happiness, fulfillment, and flourishing (Journal of Positive Psychology, 2005). It is a science of positive aspects of human life, such as happiness, well-being and flourishing. It can be summarized in the words of its founder, Martin Seligman, as the 'scientific study of optimal human functioning [that] aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive' (Seligman, 2000). In other words positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005). People who experience and express positive emotions more often are likely to be satisfied with their lives and have more rewarding interpersonal relationships. They are more productive, satisfied at their job, helpful to other people, reach desired goals in life and are also more likely to be physically healthier, more resistant to illness, and may even live longer than others.

Basic Themes and Assumptions of Positive Psychology
The Good Life

One of the major themes that defines positive psychology is a focus on the elements and predictors of *good life*. The term "good life" does not only mean to have extreme wealth, power, prestige, and beauty but it comes from philosophical

speculations about what holds the greatest value in life or what is the nature of the highest or most important "good." When we apply this idea to human life, "the good life" refers to the factors that contribute most to a well-lived and fulfilling life. Nicholas Dent says, "Things that are good may also be considered from the point of view of how they will contribute to a well-spent or happy human life. The idea of a complete good is that which will wholly satisfy the complete need and destiny of humans, the *summum bonum*". Qualities that help define the good life are those that enrich our lives, make life worth living, and foster strong character. Seligman (2002) defines the good life as "using your signature strengths every day to produce authentic happiness and abundant gratification". In positive psychology, the good life has been seen as a combination of three elements :

1. **Positive connections to others,**
2. **Positive individual traits, and**
3. **Life regulation qualities.**

Aspects of our behavior that contribute to forging **positive connections to others** can include the ability to love, the presence of altruistic concerns, the ability to forgive, and the presence of spiritual connections to help create a sense of deeper meaning and purpose in life.

Positive individual traits can include, among other elements, a sense of integrity, the ability to play and be creative, and the presence of virtues such as courage and humility.

Finally, **life regulation qualities** are those that allow us to regulate our day-to-day behaviour in such a way that we can accomplish our goals while helping to enrich the people and institutions that we encounter along the way. These qualities include a sense of individuality or autonomy, a high degree of healthy self-control, and the presence of wisdom as a guide to behavior.

Happiness (Two traditions)

Happiness is defined here as it is often defined empirically-that is, via people's direct ratings of their happiness, long-term balance of positive and negative effect, or life satisfaction (Lyubomirsky, 2001),

Hedonic Subjective well-being (SWB) - Hedonism is one of the oldest approaches to a definition of the good life, and it focuses on pleasure as the good life's basic component. Hedonism in its narrowest and most restricted form is the belief that the pursuit of well-being is fundamentally the pursuit of individual sensual pleasures. While the single-minded pursuit of pleasure is one of the oldest approaches to the good life, this form of hedonism has been seen as self-defeating and unworkable by most societies throughout history. Nearly everyone realizes that sensual pleasures are short-lived, that they result in a constant struggle to repeat them, and that when focused on exclusively they produce no lasting changes in personality and no personal growth. The hedonic approach, however, does not have to be simple self-indulgence or a "me first" attitude toward life.

The broader form of hedonism, however, includes the idea that pleasure is the basic motivating force behind most human behaviours but also recognizes that certain pleasures require positive social interactions with other people. For instance, some variations of the hedonic approach view family life or civic involvement as ways to maximize pleasure and contentment for all people involved. Applying this more "civilized" definition of hedonic well-being to the good life, the goal is to create high levels of happiness for oneself and for other people. This form of hedonism has been a basic assumption behind many conceptualizations of the good life throughout history and is very much alive today (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwartz, 1999).

Eudaimonic happiness Psychological well-being (PWB)

The *eudaimonic approach*, on the other hand, tends to focus on well-being as a function of fulfilling one's potential. In this case, well being may or may not be associated with the maximization of happiness. Eudaimonic well-being is, however, most associated with the fulfilling of one's "true nature" and finding one's "true self" (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The eudaimonic approach may also be associated with living one's life in tune with the values and virtues that are the most desirable and most indicative of the highest good. The focus of this approach is on expanding potentials and cultivating personal growth. For instance, Alan Waterman (1993) referred to the eudaimonic dimension as "personal expressiveness." He found that this approach to well-being was associated with activities that allowed opportunities that help develop a person's best potentials and the realization of the true self.

Ryff and Keyes (1995) described six aspects of positive functioning and actualization of potentials as the basis for psychological well-being which includes autonomy, personal growth, self acceptance, life purpose, environmental mastery, and positive relations with others. They argue that it is the presence of these strengths and realized potentials that define this well-being and a fully functioning person.

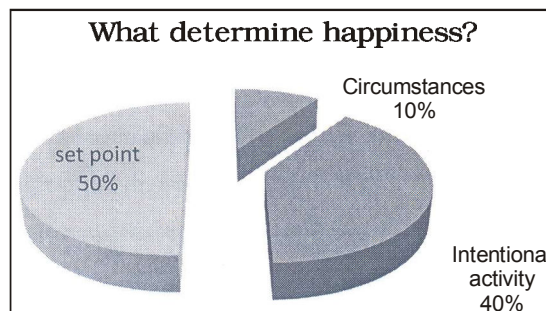
Since the time of the ancient Greeks, the hedonic and the eudaimonic approaches to well-being have played a major role in defining how people think about the nature of the good life. In addition, research has supported the idea that these

two conceptualizations are important in how psychology thinks about and measures well-being even today (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

DETERMINANTS OF HAPPINESS

Our model identifies three primary factors that influence a person's current happiness level: the happiness set point, circumstantial/contextual factors in the person's life, and volitional/activity-based factors in the person's life.

Set Point : The *set point* is genetically determined and essentially constant. In a sense, it represents the level of happiness a person is likely to experience when all other factors in the model are equal to zero. In other words, the set point is analogous to the intercept in a within-subject regression equation, a constant that always contributes to the output value and that determines it exactly when the other factors in the model have no influence or have canceling influences. The regression equation metaphor suggests an interesting possibility-that the set point is not really a *set point*, but rather, a *set range*. That is, people may have considerable latitude to be located *above* the central point, depending on the other factors in the model. An example involving an analogy with the intelligence quotient (IQ): Although an average individual's potential range of IQ may be largely determined at birth (i.e., between 85 and 115), exactly where he or she ends up in the range may depend on other factors. In a stimulating and nurturing environment, the child may achieve an IQ near the top of his or her potential, and in a non-supportive environment, the child may be at the bottom of his or her potential range.



Life Circumstances : Positive life changes relevant to happiness fall into two broad categories-those based on changes in the circumstances, settings, and facts of a person's life and those based on changes in a person's intentional activities in life. "Circumstances" refers to demographic variables, such as age, marital status, employment status, and income. They also refer to geographic and contextual variables, such as the home and region in which the person lives, the conveniences a person enjoys, and the person's possessions. All of these examples share an important feature in common-they tend to remain relatively static and stable, becoming part of the background of the person's life or, as James (1909) eloquently put it, "the whole envelope of circumstance." Our model assumes that people relatively quickly adapt to positive circumstantial changes precisely because of their static character.

Intentional Activities : In contrast, *activities* refer to the intentional and effortful practices in which a person engages. Such practices may be cognitive (i.e., regularly adopting an optimistic or positive attitude), behavioural (i.e., regularly being kind to others or regularly engaging in physical exercise), or volitional (i.e., identifying and striving for meaningful personal goals). Common to all of these is the notion of intentional effort and commitment in service of particular desired objectives or experiences.

Importance of Positive Emotions to both Mental and Physical Health

Positive psychology is also needed today because scientific research is revealing how important positive emotions and adaptive behaviours are to living a satisfying and productive life. For much of the twentieth century, many scientists assumed that the study of positive emotions was somewhat frivolous at best and probably unnecessary. Many assumed that psychology should focus on more pressing social problems, such as drug abuse, criminal behaviour of the treatment of serious psychological disorders like depression.

Recent research, however, suggests that the study of positive emotions can actually help to fight these problems. For instance, some newer forms of psychotherapy focus on the development of positive emotions and adaptive coping strategies rather than focusing on negative emotions, internal conflicts, and anxieties formed in childhood. These forms of psychotherapy can be quite successful in helping people emerge from debilitating psychological problems.

Evidences focused on the important influence that positive emotions and adaptive behaviour have on a number of positive outcomes in life. People who experience and express positive emotions more often are likely to be satisfied with their lives and have more rewarding interpersonal relationships. They are more productive and satisfied at their job, are helpful to other people, and are more likely to reach desired goals in life (Danner *et al.*, 1999). Interestingly, people who experience and express positive emotions often are also more likely to be physically healthier, more resistant to illness, and may even live longer than others (Danner, *et al.*, 2001).

Negative emotions are still important

Positive psychology does not deny that there are many problems in our day to day life that need attention. It is also obvious that at times negative emotions can be necessary for survival. We would be far too vulnerable if we completely eliminated fear, anxiety, or skepticism from our lives. In addition, positive psychology also includes recognition that the tragic elements in life can enrich our experience of being human (Wool folk, 2002). There must be a reason why people throughout history have been drawn to plays, paintings, poetry, and even music that express sadness, tragedy, and defeat. It may be that in order to appreciate the positive in life we must also know something of the negative. Positive psychology does not deny that every effort should be made to help eliminate problems associated with social injustices

and social inequalities. Having recognized the place for negative emotions, however, we note that the desire to be happier and more satisfied with life is universal.

Challenges to Positive Psychology

The positive psychology movement is not without its challengers and critics.

v Many criticisms seem to arise from the assumption that if there is a positive psychology, then the rest of psychology must be negative psychology, and if we need a positive psychology it is because this so-called negative psychology has taught us little. This interpretation is unfortunate and, more important, untrue, as we hope what we have written here already demonstrates. In fact, it is because psychology (which is mostly neutral, but with more negative than positive topics) has been so extraordinarily successful that the imbalance, the lack of progress on positive topics, has become so glaring.

v A second criticism is that people who study positive psychology fail to recognize the very real negative sides of life, preferring a Pollyanna view of the world. However, here we echo those who have come before us in articulating the goals of positive psychology. The aim is not to erase or supplant work on pathology, distress, and dysfunction. Rather, the aim is to build up what we know about human resilience, strength, and growth to integrate and complement the existing knowledge base. A related concern is that the movement has cult like qualities in which people get together to share their Pollyannaism.

v Many researchers refer to ourselves as “positive psychologists.” We merely find that the positive psychology movement helps us study our topics more effectively. Perhaps some of the most daunting challenges to positive psychology stem from defining what actually is positive and the ambiguous line between *describing* something as “good” and *prescribing* it as “good” (Held, 2004). An appropriate analogy can be drawn from medical research showing, for example, that exercise and leafy green vegetables are “good” for us. In the same way, we believe that findings from positive psychology can and should encourage people to adopt behaviours and mental practices that are “good” for them. However, in medicine, what is good is rather straightforward: living longer, without illness. In psychology, labeling something as positive or good may not be as simple (Held, 2004).

v Diener and Suh (1997) suggested three bases for what is positive or what is valuable. First, the choices people make are one indication of value. That is, if something is chosen regularly, the chooser probably believes in its value or goodness. Second, people can judge whether or not something is satisfying: whether an object, event, process, or outcome is pleasant. Third, judgments of what is positive or good can be made with reference to some value system or set of cultural norms. Our shared beliefs regarding what is wrong or unacceptable and what is right or acceptable can guide decisions about what aims to pursue. These three criteria sometimes agree and sometimes do not. For example, sex outside the context of a committed relationship may be

pleasant and enjoyable but may be unacceptable in terms of one's religious value system, and one may not choose to engage in it often. Filling up one's gas tank may be chosen often, but it is neither experientially enjoyable nor valued by an environmentally conscious belief system. Reporting for jury duty may be good as defined by civic values, but it may not be pleasant and is rarely chosen freely. Conversely, the three criteria may also converge, for instance, in playing with one's child.

Conclusion: In short, the meaning of what is positive or good is complex and multidimensional, and the study of positive psychological themes requires recognition of this complexity in theories and empirical designs. An excellent example of this complexity unfolding in psychological research is Norem's (2001) work on defensive pessimism. There is a great deal of evidence that optimism is associated with good outcomes (health and well-being) and pessimism is associated with bad outcomes (Taylor *et al.*, 2000). This may lead to the prescription "Think optimistically and you will do better." However, as suggested by Norem and Chang (2002), people are much more complex, and a "one size fits all" model does not work. Specifically, Norem's work shows that for a subgroup of people with a defensive pessimism personality style, there are real costs associated with positive thinking, and to insist that optimism would be good for them would be a disservice. There are likely to be many other circumstances in which the three criteria of goodness may not converge, or may not converge for everyone. To meet the challenge of complexity, positive psychology must move beyond the description of main effects (optimism, humor, forgiveness, and curiosity are good) and begin to look more closely at the complex interactions that are the hallmark of most of psychology, as well as of medicine.

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