Positive Psychology

The 'disease model' or mental illness approach to psychology, which focuses on identifying what's wrong with people, in order to 'fix' them, has been challenged over the past two decades. Martin Seligman initiated the development of positive psychology in 1998. He recognized that treating anxiety, depression or anger could only go so far – a conscious focus on positivity and resilience is needed to achieve happiness and life satisfaction. He defined positive psychology as: "the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life".

According to Seligman: "there are human strengths that act as buffers against mental illness: courage, future-mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skill, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, the capacity for flow and insight, to name several. We have shown that learning optimism prevents depression and anxiety in children and adults, roughly halving their incidence over a two year period… building a strength, rather than repairing damage, effectively prevents depression and anxiety."[1]

Seligman described three main aims for positive psychology:
1. Be as concerned with human strength as human weakness
2. Be as concerned with building strength as repairing damage
3. Be concerned with making lives of normal people fulfilling

"The good life" is achieved by "using your signature strengths every day to produce authentic happiness and abundant gratification".

While genetic disposition and life circumstances play a large role in how we experience life, so, too, do our choices about how we respond to and process our experiences. Anxiety, sadness, anger and other 'negative' emotions are a normal part of human life and shouldn't be suppressed. But we can choose how we react to these emotions, and the kind of behaviours that will help us to manage them, rather than be ruled by them. We should aim to minimise responses that foster hopelessness and fear and try to focus on developing a sense of optimism toward life. This requires us to focus on our strengths rather than weaknesses, to view difficult tasks or situations as challenges, rather than threats, and to recognise that happiness fuels success, rather than vice versa.

Carol Ryff has identified six factors which foster psychological well-being: self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations with others. In a similar vein, Seligman's 2011 book *Flourish* coins the acronym PERMA as the basis for a meaningful life: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and purpose, and Accomplishments. (Engagement, in this sense, is also referred to as "flow" – a state of deep effortless concentration and

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[1] Martin E. P. Seligman (2000) Positive Psychology, Positive Prevention, and Positive Therapy, University of Pennsylvania

involvement in the task at hand, leading to a sense of clarity, purpose and capability). This can be compromised when overall wellbeing is decreased.

There are a number of ways in which we can train our brains to think more positively:

- Practice gratitude. Make a habit of recording things you are grateful for on a daily basis. This trains the brain to look for the positive, rather than the negative
- Find things to look forward to: Anticipation can be as pleasurable as the event/reward itself
- Write about positive experiences, as a way to relive them
- Exercise, to stimulate endorphins, raises your mood and improves health
- Practice mindfulness and meditation, take time out to clear the mind and just breath
- Practice acts of kindness. Even small things like complimenting someone can help to improve our own happiness
- Work on strengthening your relationships, with your partner, your family, colleagues and friends. We receive, share, and spread positivity to others through relationships.