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Article 45

A History of Happiness: The roots of Positive Psychology, Insight, and Clinical Applications from 2005 to 2015

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Abstract

Positive psychology has burgeoned in the past decade. Research in the field has addressed everything from post-traumatic growth to prosocial behavior. Providing insight into human strengths and offering clinical interventions of use with a range of client issues, positive psychology has much to offer counselors. This article examines the past ten years of positive psychology research and condenses an abundance of literature into summaries about six of the most discussed areas and counselor applicable topics.

Introduction

As counselors continue to look for pragmatic techniques to add to their repertoire, the field of positive psychology offers an array of interventions that are relatively simple to comprehend, with research backing (Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2010). Positive psychology is the study of subjective well-being (Compton & Hoffman, 2012). What started as inquiry into happiness has evolved into an analysis of human flourishing (Seligman, 2012). For years, notions and speculations about what contributed to subjective well-being abounded, albeit with little to no basis in empirical study. This was of minor relevance to behavioral scientists, as most of their focus was on mental illness. Even into the late 1990s, the ratio of negative to positive studies in psychology was seventeen to one (Achor, 2010). Positive psychology does not ignore harsh reality as much as encourage an investigation into the entire spectrum of human experience, including those factors that contribute to fulfillment, not just distress. As positive psychology began to establish itself, research into the dynamics of human potential proliferated. Some research indicates that positive psychology exercises may help increase happiness, but their influence is similar to that of positive placebos (Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012). Yet, more studies suggest that positive psychology interventions have inherent worth beyond placebo effects (Pietrowsky & Mikutta, 2012; Seear & Vella-Brodrick, 2013). Research findings from the field have addressed

everything from the relationship between happiness and longevity (Diener & Chan, 2011) to the urban psychology of character strengths (Park & Peterson, 2010).

Positive psychology is applicable to the counseling field in many ways. Counselors are more frequently employing a strengths-based approach with their clients (Kress & Paylo, 2014). School counselors (Galassi & Akos, 2007), career counselors (Zunker, 2011), and clinical mental health counselors (Kress & Paylo, 2014) use strengths-based modalities, and positive psychology can be augmented into such approaches. In addition, positive psychology provides counselors with knowledge about human strengths and their correlates (Linley, Nielsen, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener, 2010).

This article presents positive psychology findings from a span of 10 years, 2005 to 2015. The focus is on inquiry most relevant to the counseling field. Insight and clinical applications that counseling practitioners can use are emphasized. First, an overview of the history of happiness is presented for the sake of background into the field. Positive psychology, like all behavioral sciences, has roots in moral philosophy. These ethical theories about right and wrong present the philosophical underpinnings of psychological happiness. A conceptualization of contemporary positive psychology is discussed next, followed by synopses of major research findings.

Happiness and the Moral Good

Traditionally, happiness has been associated with the moral good (Haidt, 2006). Three major theories from moral philosophy emerged throughout history, each claiming the true path to righteousness. The happiness of an individual was seen as secondary and the only path to it was through morality. The first normative ethical theory is titled virtue ethics. The claim of virtue ethics is that morality rests in character, and thus in acting out virtuous traits. For example, if a circumstance called for bravery, then showing bravery would make a person morally good and equal parts happy. The second theory is deontology. Deontological theories, or duty-based ethics, take two primary forms. Divine command theory states that one is morally right if one stays in obedience to duty, in this case from a religion or deity. The means justify the ends in this theory; therefore one should obey a religion's dictums even if dire consequences ensue. Another subset of deontological theory is Kantian theory, from the philosopher Immanuel Kant. Rather than obedience to religion or God, Kantian theory stresses acting according to universal reason. The third theory is the opposite of deontology and is titled consequentialist. In this theory, the ends justify the means. The locus of right and wrong, and thus happiness, is on the outcome of ones actions. There are two major subsets of consequentialist ethics, utilitarian and egoism. For utilitarian theory, good and happiness is determined by the greatest outcome for the greatest number of people. Egoism places the locus of right or wrong on the self. In egoism, when the self thrives, good is had (Annas, 1995).

Psychology and counseling both have roots in philosophy. Thus, behavioral science theories are reflected in philosophical frameworks, sometimes directly, other times indirectly. Even contemporary theories of counseling have roots in moral philosophy. Solution-focused therapy and certainly behaviorism, with their emphases on doing and action, share a common bond with consequentialist theory. As an applied science, positive psychology attempts to isolate happiness and well-being and study what makes them come about, either through morality or otherwise. A common

conceptualization of positive psychology, after a near myopic focus on happiness alone during its beginning years, is that of a scientific and practical exploration into human strengths (Lopez, Pedrotti, & Snyder, 2014). Human strengths are broken down further in a model with the acronym PERMA, by positive psychology founding father Martin Seligman.

Positive Psychology Conceptualization

Different theorists conceptualize positive psychology, and actively try to shape the field subsequently, in different manners. Well-being theory, postulated by Martin Seligman (2012), posits five dimensions of holistic fulfillment. Each element must contain three properties that include the ability to contribute to well-being, of being sought for its own sake or as an end unto itself, and of exclusivity, or the ability to be studied on its own, independent of the other elements. The five dimensions are:
1. Positive emotion, or the pleasant life, encompassing happiness and life satisfaction. While happiness was formerly the end of positive psychology, in this framework it is a component part of a greater state, well-being.
2. Engagement, similar to the state of flow, involves participation in a pleasurable activity. Seligman notes that during engagement, cognition and affect are typically not present. Only after the activity/event does one reflect and proclaim a sense of enjoyment.
3. Meaning, or dealing with something larger than the self, something that transcends egoism, is the third element. Meaning is both subjective, capable of being important only to the person engrossed in the activity or advocacy, and objective, at least through the lens of history. For example, whether or not Rosa Parks found personal meaning in her reluctance to surrender her bus seat to a White man is essentially irrelevant to the meaning this act has had on civil rights.
4. Positive relationships, which are supreme in this model. As social animals, having good relationships with others is crucial to health and happiness.
5. Accomplishment, which is an individual pursuit. Accomplishing—or achieving—something can be done in one instance or a life can be devoted to it. Winning a wrestling match against a friend versus dedicating one's life to excelling in the sport illustrates the difference.

With his PERMA model, Seligman has seemingly broken positive psychology down to its building blocks. Additionally, the field is given a focus: Well-being, not happiness. Happiness, in this model, is but one direction that autonomous agents can pursue. To properly flourish, people aspire to something holistic, which is deemed well-being.

Counselor Applications of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is relevant to the clinical counselor in a number of ways. Techniques offered by the field work well as supplements to the traditional theoretical approach the counselor is already employing (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005). While several interventions and techniques from positive psychology were proposed from 2005 to 2015, six appear to have longevity by way of copious research backing. They are empirically validated and often discussed in the literature. As well, each is versatile in

application. The six are post-traumatic growth, gratitude, using signature strengths in new ways, the three good things intervention, the best possible self intervention, and prosocial behavior.

Post-traumatic Growth

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has been shown to have debilitating effects on those afflicted (Raja, 2012). However, some people who survive a harrowing event experience not only distress, but ultimately, positive change. According to Joseph (2013), there are three ways that people report self-growth after a traumatic event. For one, relationships are valued more. Survivors discuss how they long for meaningful, intimate relationships. Two, survivors report an evolving sense of self. Self-identity and self-awareness become enhanced. Both strengths and shortcomings are acknowledged, while neither is denied or distorted. Third, there are improvements in how survivors perceive and approach life. Often, an ability to appreciate and practice mindfulness, or staying in the present moment, is mentioned.

Post-traumatic growth has been correlated with certain personality traits, including optimism, hope, and extraversion (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). An explanation for how post-traumatic growth develops is offered by Albert Ellis' Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy. Ellis' ABC model posits that how one feels about any given event is dependent on the perceptual filter than strains said event. An activating event (A) occurs, B is the belief about the event, and C is the consequent affect. While the tendency is to conclude that the event causes the affect, according to Ellis, it is the belief about what happened that is responsible for the resulting emotion. Modify the belief and the feeling will change. People who experience self-growth following a traumatic event perceive the event not just as adversity, but also opportunity to fortify themselves and become stronger as a result (Blanchard, 2013).

Gratitude

Gratitude is among the most highly researched of the variables studied in positive psychology. A wealth of research indicates that gratitude is associated with everything from lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol to having a higher life satisfaction (Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2008). It is associated with increases in relationship connection and satisfaction (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010). The state of being gracious and the general trait of gratitude are associated with increased happiness (Watkins, 2013).

Clinically, one application of gratitude that has been shown to increase happiness is the gratitude visit (Linley, Joseph, Maltby, Harrington, & Wood, 2009). This technique entails instructing clients to first consider someone from their past who helped them, but was never properly thanked. Clients then should hand-write a thank you note to this person, being as specific as possible about the deed and how the kindness affected their life. Next, if possible, the client is asked to deliver the letter in person. At that time, the client should read out loud the content of the letter. This intervention is shown to cause a boost in happiness and decrease in symptoms related to depression (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

Using Signature Strengths in New Ways

Positive psychology aligns well with a strengths-based approach to clinical counseling. Theorists have developed a classification system based on six virtues and 24 character strengths. Clients are instructed to complete a questionnaire – available online for free – that identifies their top five, or signature strengths. Strengths are grouped around one of the six virtues. For example, the virtue of temperance has the strengths of forgiveness, modesty, prudence, and self-regulation under it. Once clients uncover their signature strengths, they are asked to use their strengths in innovative ways each day for one week (Seligman et al., 2005).

Counselors can use a strengths-based approach to help their clients more efficiently reach their goals. Consequently, this leads to greater need fulfillment and enhanced well-being for clients (Linley et al., 2010). The signature strengths of positive psychology lend themselves well to solution-focused models of counseling. Their integration has proven useful in approaching anxiety disorders (Quick, 2013). Additionally, solution-focused theory and strengths-based approaches work well with batterer intervention programs to help end family violence (Lehmann & Simmons, 2009) and treat depression (Corcoran, 2009).

Three Good Things

The three good things exercise asks clients to record three favorable things that happened each day for one week. Furthermore, clients are asked to write about their role in making the good events happen. Specifically, clients are asked how they helped cause the good thing (Seligman, 2012). In doing so, the clients' attention is drawn away from states such as melancholy, and instead they become aware of positive events they previously would have missed. This intervention has been shown to increase happiness and decrease symptoms of depression for six months (Seligman et al., 2005). The three good things exercise has likewise been found to increase resilience (Pietrowsky & Mikutta, 2012).

Best Possible Self

The best possible self exercise has been found to raise and sustain a positive mood (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). For this exercise, clients are asked to first visualize their optimal selves, complete with a realistic, yet ideal, environment in which this self exists. Next, clients are to record their thoughts on paper daily or at least once a week. Benefits from completing the exercise include improving positive affect and flow (Layous, Nelson, & Lyubomirsky, 2013) along with boosting optimism about the future (Renner, Schwarz, Peters, & Huibers, 2014).

Prosocial Behavior

Although long presumed to be true, there is now an abundance of research that backs up the notion that helping others really does help the self (Aknin, Dunn, Whillans, Grant, & Norton, 2013; Knafo & Israel, 2012; McAndrew & Perilloux, 2012). While positive psychology studies this phenomenon, it by no means holds a monopoly. Public health researchers have studied the effects of altruistic behavior on stress and mortality (Poulin, Brown, Dillard, & Smith, 2013). These researchers found that participating in

prosocial acts reduced mortality, while other authors have concluded that helping others leads to deeper relationships and well-being (Schwartz, Keyl, Marcum, & Bode, 2009; Post, 2007). Counselors can use these findings clinically by encouraging their clients to volunteer in organizations that help those in need. In addition, counselors can explore with their clients how past instances of prosocial behavior made them feel. Counselors themselves engage in prosocial behavior when they offer pro bono services. Helping others is a true win-win situation.

Conclusion

Positive psychology offers counselors insight into human strengths and clinical interventions that are effective and relatively easy to administer. In the past decade, the field has produced a wealth of research into areas previously speculated about, yet unknown to scientific inquiry. Because of its emphasis on strengths, positive psychology blends well with counseling. Counselors have likely been using interventions studied by positive psychology for years, and the literature now supports exercises such as doing good deeds for others and focusing on what is right in life. In sum, the previous decade in positive psychology supports the axioms of know thyself, love thy neighbor, and do good works. The wisdom of the ages couples with scientific validation in a field that allows counselors and clients alike to succeed.

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