
Positive Psychology: Supporting individuals with disabilities in higher education and in the workplace

Positive Psychology

Positive Psychology focuses on building strengths and competencies rather than merely treating deficits and disorders. It has been defined as the scientific study of optimal human functioning (Seligman, 2009). Positive psychology is concerned with discovering what makes people happier, more productive and more successful (Seligman, 2003). As Boniwell (2012) puts it

Positive psychology is still psychology- it just studies different and often far more interesting topics and asks slightly different questions, such as 'what works?' rather than 'what doesn't?' or 'what is right?' with the person rather than 'what is wrong?'

A central goal of positive psychology is to advance our knowledge about how to help individuals improve their levels of happiness and create the conditions that allow people to flourish and thrive (Seligman, 2011). The focus is not on fleeting feelings of pleasure or well-being but deeper reaches of human fulfilment and is fundamentally concerned with harnessing human strengths and virtues and improving the human condition through finding meaning and purpose and increasing happiness.

Authentic happiness is a combination of a pleasurable life, an engaged life and a meaningful life (Seligman, 2003). According to Szymanski (2000) we know that authentic happiness for individuals with disabilities it is related to life satisfaction and a positive self-image.

For any individual, pride, independence and self-respect are all key components of life satisfaction and their sense of self. These areas can be more problematic for an individual with a disability who can feel they have restricted independence, limited control over their life, their choices and the decisions concerning their future. Szymanski (2000) warns professionals against 'over protection'. We have to balance the level of support required with realistic expectations and as with any adult allow the person the right to take risks. As tutors, mentors and supervisors we have to be careful that in our efforts to support these individuals, we do not compromise their feelings of control or restrict their choices because of their disability. We have to strive to create a positive environment where they can make informed decisions.

As professionals we can move to a strengths focus. This approach is very empowering when working with an individual with a disability as it is a move away from a medical model. Taking a strength focus can enhance the person's self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). Using this model we can help individuals to explore their strengths and develop an awareness of their limitations. The positive psychology approach does not diminish in any way the impact of a disability or the pain and suffering that any individual might endure (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). The aim is to shift the focus onto what works and the strengths that the

individual has developed. These strengths can be used to identify future goals and additional supports that might be required to ensure success.

Strength and flow

Identifying a person's strengths facilitates meaningful engagement with work and allows them to experience satisfaction and flourish. There are formal assessment tools to help identify strengths such as the Gallup's Clifton strengths finder (www.strengthsfinder.com) or the Values in Action (www.positivepsychology.org) which are available online.

Informal assessment of strengths can be conducted in conversations identifying conditions where the individual has experienced flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Flow has been defined as

the intense experiential involvement in moment-to-moment activity, physical or mental. Attention is fully invested in the task at hand and the person functions at her or his fullest capacity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, pp.394).

Simply becoming aware of flow can make flow happen more regularly. We can support flow in two ways (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Firstly by drawing attention to the concept of flow individuals can discuss their passion, the specific activities that enables flow and the strengths associated with these activities.

Secondly we can examine aspects of the environment to see how we can facilitate flow. We can identify circumstances, task, situations or specific projects where the person can experience flow and make this happen in the workplace or in college. Flow is linked to internal motivation. It is usually associated with a high skill level in the particular activity.

Optimism, motivation and hope

Optimism and hope play a role in enhancing motivation and fostering resilience.

Optimism has been defined as the expectation that good things will happen (Chang, 2001). Optimism frames our world view in terms of hopefulness and confidence for the best possible outcome. Many people are born optimists for those who are not there is good news. We now know that hope and optimism involve a set of skills that can be taught and learned. It is a way of thinking that individuals can choose to engage with and a capacity that can be modelled and taught.

Optimism is not simply a matter of inborn temperament, but also a skill that can be learned by recognising unhelpful thinking strategies and replacing them with positive ones. (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008, pp.193)

This optimistic thinking can be a protective factor in the area of physical and mental health. How people attempt to

make sense or explain the causes of stressful or adverse life events can undermine psychological and physical functioning.

Our optimism can influence our motivation and our perseverance or grit. This was investigated in a study conducted by Seligman and others (1990). This study involved identifying optimists and pessimists on the university swimming team. They were asked to swim their best event and then given a false time that led them to believe they swam slower than their actual performance. The feedback of the slower time increased motivation for the optimists who did better the next time but decreased motivation which resulted in no improved performance for the pessimists. The optimists attribute their poor performance to external events, which were temporary and limited to this one swimming event. They had a positive mindset and a belief that they could improve their time, the hope that they would get better in the future.

Optimism and hope for the future are interlinked and impact on resilience.

Hope is like a journey: a destination, a map, and a means of transport are needed. From psychological research on hope, we know that it is important to have a goal and make a plan of the ways to reach that goal. Hopeful people have a clear aim or destination in mind. They also have a clear vision for reaching their goal - a mental map. They also believe that they can do something to get closer to their goal - they are their own means of transport (Snyder, 2000).

Psychologists characterise hope as a human strength which involves the capacities to:

- clearly conceptualise goals (goals thinking)
- develop strategies to reach those goals (pathways thinking-'this is how I'll do it')
- initiate and sustain the motivations for reaching those goals (agency thinking - I know I can do it!) (Snyder, 1994)

Hope is more than an emotion it is an action. Hope happens when we focus on clear goals, when we think about the future we want, and how we can make our vision a reality. When we combine thinking about our goals with a plan to reach them and the energy that goes with motivation and belief, we are at our most hopeful. Hope energises, motivates and leads to behaviour which helps us realise our goals. A goal can be small or large, a lifetime pursuit or a short-term objective.

When working with adults with disabilities we can support them in setting realistic goals.

This can take many forms – written goals, drawings or recordings or even using an app to set and track a goal on a mobile phone. It is important that milestones on the route or short term goals be identified. A clear path or multiple pathways to the goals be identified and numerous pathways be mapped out. A scheduled review of key achievements or activities completed can enhance motivation. Plans for obstacles that might present and strategies for maintaining motivation or enlisting support to enhance motivation be clearly specified. In the work place this might be measured in output for example, the number of words typed per minute or the number of forms or tasks completed independently per day. In the education sector this might be assignments produced or handed in and grades on those assignments towards the final qualification.

Supports that are necessary along the way are put in place. In the work setting it might be a mentor to answer questions and a process for getting “unstuck” when a challenge is presented. In education this might be having a

study pal or identifying a support staff member who can assist them in accessing the library and relevant materials required for an assignment in various formats. The underlying theme is that with support you can achieve this if you keep working on each small step you will reach your goal.

Final thoughts

Positive psychology has shifted the focus from the negative to the positive, from a medical model of disability to a strengths based model. It has provided a framework for examining the strengths and challenges of each individual. Here are some of the questions positive psychology attempts to answer:

- What makes an individual happy, more satisfied with their life?
- How can we use strengths to increase happiness?
- How can we promote optimal conditions for flow?
- How do optimism and hope enhance motivation and grit?
- How can we define hope to support individuals to achieve their goals?

All these are very relevant questions when working with any adult to enhance their self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-confidence and give them a sense of control over their own future.

Positive Psychology can give us an additional framework to support individuals with disabilities in higher education and in the workplace. Many of the strategies and techniques are based on research, however more research needs to be conducted with specific populations. It is anticipated in this developing field, more evidence will be gather in the future and this will assist us in identifying more targeted interventions. Positive psychology has more to contribute and we will watch space this with eager anticipation.

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Dr Moya O'Brien is an experienced clinical psychologist and co-founder of ICEP Europe. She completed her training in Ireland and the USA. She has over 25 years' experience working with young people with a range of disabilities including Autism Spectrum Disorder. She regularly consults with a wide range of professional groups including teachers, and youth groups, and presents at national and international conferences. Moya's current research interests include the application of Applied Behaviour analysis, Positive Psychology to enhance learning and the use of technology and online learning environments. Moya has been designing online education modules and training courses since 2001.