

Positive psychology essay

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The authors argue that the scientific study of human strengths and virtues, and the positive aspects of human nature, should be embraced as a legitimate part of psychology. In the world of natural and social sciences, scientists have studied the structure and natural functioning of their topics of interest – for example the physicist who admires the genius of Einstein or the archaeologist who appreciates the wonders of the ancient world. However in the field of psychology, clinical psychologists have tended to focus on the study and treatment of pathologies rather than the study of what makes human beings thrive and how to encourage them to do so. In their quest to find “fixes” for the delusions, illusions and weaknesses of human beings, scant attention has been paid to the nature of psychological health. Such a negative bias prevents a clear understanding of reality – a reality where the majority of people rate themselves as happy and satisfied with their lives (Meyers, 2000). The authors urge psychologists to adopt a more appreciative perspective regarding human potentials, capacities and motives. The value of adopting such an approach is seen in the emerging field of positive psychology – such as the study of happiness (Sonia Lyubormirsky, 2001, *American Psychologist*); human resilience (Ann S Marsten, 2001, *American Psychologist*) and positive emotions (Barbara L Frederickson, 2001, *American Psychologist*).

The link between positive emotional states and physical well being is addressed in this paper. The authors have cited several research studies which have provided strong evidence that positive moods enhance immune function while negative mood states increase people’s susceptibility to illness. A person’s mood was also found to influence their perceptions about

their physical symptoms as well as their decisions about medical treatment. The more positive the mood, the more proactive they tend to be, in practising health promoting behaviours and seeking treatment. Positive emotional states – especially humour and optimism, have also been found to promote psychological resilience in people coping with a serious illness.

The authors emphasized the crucial role that health-care workers play, in inspiring hope and optimism in their patients, as illustrated in a study on placebo therapy (Frank, 1994). The authors also considered the impact of behaviours such as alcohol abuse, smoking and binge eating to cope with negative emotions. Lastly, the impact of interpersonal relationships and social support on people’s emotional states was examined. Research shows that individuals who have minimal social support and relationships are more prone to illness and mood disturbances. Salovey and his colleagues conclude that the study of emotional states and health will continue in the future; scientific breakthroughs will pave the way for relevant clinical practice.

Can psychological beliefs such as optimism, personal control and a sense of meaning help to prolong life in the face of traumatic illnesses such as HIV? Rigorous research was conducted among HIV positive men to analyse the progression of the disease and whether psychosocial resources such as positive illusions can have a beneficial effect on the course of the illness (Reed et al., 1994) Participants were assessed on their realistic acceptance about their own deaths.

Those who “ realistically accepted” the likelihood of dying, showed a greater progression of the disease and died earlier; as compared to those who exhibited “ unrealistic optimism” about the possibility of dying. The study on

asymptomatic HIV positive men also found that those who had experienced the loss of a partner or close friend also exhibited negative expectations, resulting in the likelihood of symptom development in the follow up period. The researchers also explored how “cognitive adaptation” or having positive illusions may help people find meaning even while facing life threatening illnesses. Better survival rates were found among the men who had higher cognitive processing and who were able to find meaning from their experience versus those who did not. From the research evidence, the authors conclude that psychological resources such as optimism, personal control and the search for meaning, help people adapt to stressful circumstances and protect health. In the future, research into these resources will be important weapons in the fight against illnesses.

David G Myers, Hope College (2000) The Funds, Friends and Faith of Happy People, *American Psychologist*, Pages 56 – 65, January 2000 Myers examines the many insights and breakthroughs that have been gained through the scientific study of the human pursuit of happiness. This emerging field of study has challenged the conventional thinking that humans are far more prone to misery than happiness. Research conducted by Ed Diener and Myers (Myers & Diener, 1996) measured the degree of subjective well-being among 1.1 million people in 45 nations, and found that most people are happy and satisfied about their lives. Further research has gone on to reveal that certain traits and temperaments seem to predispose one to experience happiness.

The state of subjective well-being is also not achieved through “extrinsic” factors like high income, wealth or possessions, but comes from appreciating

the “intrinsic” quality of one’s life, work, friendships and relationships. Subjective well-being is also positively co-related with religious faith, where one derives a sense of meaning and purpose beyond the pursuit of materialistic goals. Myers believes that research on subjective well-being will complement society’s emphasis on material and physical well being; and psychology’s preoccupation with negative emotions. By exploring the roots of happiness, we will hopefully help to reshape prevailing cultural attitudes and envision a world that enhances human well-being.