About Positive Psychology

Psychotherapy has for some time focused on an individual's troubles with a view to helping the person deal with weaknesses. In general, too little attention has been given to the idea that increasing an individual's strengths with a view to helping the person find happiness may be beneficial. (The emphasis on happiness stresses more than just feeling good. Happiness is associated with well-being – health, success, extroversion.) This focus is a major concern of positive psychology.

What is Positive Psychology?

Positive psychology is devoted to the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and positive enabling institutions. The term represents an effort to unite "scattered and disparate lines of theory and research about what makes life most worth living." The goal is to supplement "what is known about human suffering, weakness, and disorder." "The intent is to have a more complete and balanced scientific understanding of the human experience – the peaks, the valleys, and everything in between." With a view to application, there is a focus on creating evidence-based practices for "making people lastingly happier."

Classifying Character Strengths and Virtues

As an essential step in delineating well-being, Seligman and his colleagues (2004) have generated a classification schema for character strengths and values and published a handbook* designed "to do for psychological well-being what the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* ... does for psychological disorders....."

The schema encompasses six overarching virtues expressed in most cultures around the world: (1) wisdom & knowledge, (2) courage, (3) humanity, (4) justice, (5) temperance, and (6) transcendence. A total of 24 strengths of character are grouped under these virtues.

*Peterson, C. & Seligman, M. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification.* Washington, DC: Amer. Psychological Association.

Efficacy of Interventions to Increase Individual Happiness

Seligman et al. stress that "the word *happiness* is a scientifically unwieldy term and that its serious study involves dissolving the term into at least three distinct and better-defined routes to 'happiness'" – "(a) positive emotion and pleasure (the pleasant life); (b) engagement (the engaged life); and (c) meaning (the meaningful life)." Thus, their use of the term "happiness" is atheoretical – designed to stress the overall aim of positive psychology and to refer jointly to positive emotion, engagement, and meaning. They stress that the ability to integrate all three aspects is seen as more likely to be personally satisfying.

Instead of studying interventions focused on reducing suffering, their emphasis is on ways to enhance happiness. This is seen as leading to a form of psychotherapy where an individual goes not just to discuss weaknesses, but also strengths.

In studying interventions, they have identified a large set of practices that make claims about enhancing happiness, and they are pursuing randomized control trials to study them. They report some early findings and conclude that specific interventions can make people lastingly happier and that the findings have implications "for the future of positive interventions and perhaps for clinical interventions."

A Few Implications for Mental Health in Schools

An understanding of positive psychology is consistent with the efforts of schools to

- avoid a deficit view of students and emphasize strengths, assets, resilience, protective buffers

- develop a supportive, nurturing, and caring climate in classrooms and school-wide

- enhance student self-regulation

- promote social and emotional learning