Positive Psychology Interventions: In the School, for the School

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Abstract

Positive Psychology principles have revolutionized the field of mental health and also altered our views on human evolution, nature and needs and character and capacities. Positive Psychology is a rather newer branch of Psychology that focuses on human flourishing, improvement of quality of life and wellbeing and enhancements of strengths. This is a complementary strategy utilized for the treatment and promotion of mental health. As positive psychology aims to strike a balance between the age old notion of treatment of mental disorders and the contemporary trend of enhancement of wellbeing and qualities, it proves to be a perfect choice for a holistic treatment regime.

According to the New Education Policy, the scope of education has expanded beyond textbook knowledge to the holistic development of the child. This notion puts forth the need to employ methods that help to enhance the wellbeing of students within and outside classroom. Education now bears the responsibility to generate a generation of individuals who are not only academically well versed but also practically and emotionally equipped to take up their roles as responsible citizens.

The use of positive psychology interventions has shown numerous benefits especially in the field of schooling and education, among children and adolescents. The current paper intends to throw light on the benefits of implementing positive psychology based interventions in schools to deal effectively with issues pertaining to yet not limited to classrooms. These interventions are easy to implement, can be administered in groups or can be tailored as per the need of individual child. These interventions deal with building strengths and positive traits as well as with managing weaknesses and reducing negative traits.

Keywords: positive psychology, interventions, schools, wellbeing, mental health.

Introduction

Positive psychology, as a formal discipline, is a relatively newer segment of psychology that is a promising alternative to the older, pessimistically inclined and lugubrious schools of Psychology. The early schools of psychology were focused on identification, definition, classification and treatment of mental deficiencies. Psychology as a discipline was preoccupied with "pathology, weakness, and damage" (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). But as Positive Psychology rose to dominance, a major change was witnessed in the core principles of psychology. This concept is not limited to disorders and their treatment but moved outwith towards creating wellbeing. This new branch of psychology moved beyond the traditional boundaries and barriers to put forth the difference between surviving and thriving. It is the scientific study of optimal human functioning, the goals of which are to better understand and apply those factors that help individuals and communities to thrive and flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

According to Norrish and Vella-Brodrick (2009), 'Positive psychology aims to contribute to a comprehensive approach to mental health by adding an investigation of positive emotions and human strengths to existing knowledge on mental illness and dysfunction'. Positive Psychology is that branch of the subject that is committed to promote thriving by focusing on and enhancing strengths and virtues (Gable & Haidt, 2005). As per Wong (2011) a key task of positive psychology is to 'develop good and decent people as well as a civil society by promoting meaning/virtue'. These definitions by celebrated authors give us a clear picture of the ethos of positive psychology- creating goodness by enhancing the good.

The advent of positive psychology was based on an appeal by Seligman to applied psychologists with an intention to shift their focus of attention from curing mental illness to making the lives of people more productive and fulfilling, and also identifying and nurturing talent. However this does not imply that positive psychology overlooks restoration and rehabilitation. Positive psychology is often considered to be either synonymous to or entrenched in Pollyanna principle, that is, the tendency to focus only on the pleasant and positive while dismissing the disruptions or damage. Positive psychology is not myopic in its viewpoint. It is a coalescence of healing and thriving. On one hand it acknowledges the importance of strengths and on the other hand it assigns enough valences to negative emotions. As per Ryff (2003), ". . .bad things happen to people, and the healthy response is to feel the sadness, pain, frustration, fear, disappointment, anger, or shame resulting from the adverse experience. However, good things also happen to people, and the healthy response is to feel joy, pride, love, affection, pleasure, or contentment from such experience positive experiences. Thus, the capacity for experiencing and expressing both realms of emotion is central to healthy functioning." Positive psychologists believe that the knowledge of pathology is important and these findings play a crucial role in framing and application of the therapeutic routine as well as identifying the correlates, buffers and catalysts of various types of pathology.

Causatum of Positive Psychology: the emergence of Positive Psychology Intervention

The rise and spread of positive psychology movement headed by Seligman gave rise to the development of Positive Psychology Interventions. The Positive Psychology Interventions or the PPI is an overarching term for activities and interventions that are empirically derived, are based on the concepts studied in positive psychology and foster positive thoughts, emotions and actions with an intention to provide sustainable well-being and happiness (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Sin et al., 2011; Schrank et al., 2014; Sutipan et al., 2017; Hendriks et al., 2018). They work by expressly encouraging the generation of positive emotions and experiences (Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2014). PPIs can belong to different categories as per the need that they cater to like savoring, gratitude, kindness, empathy, optimism, strengths, and meaning (Parks & Schueller, 2014).

Researchers have explained the benefits of PPIs in various fields across age groups. They have proven their utility in enhancing wellbeing, flourishing, quality of life, satisfaction with life, grit and resilience etc. These interventions are simple strategies that are easy to understand, implement and follow. They can be delivered through various modalities like online or offline, individually or in groups, specific or general. A study by Hausmann, Parks, Youk, and Kwoh (2014) found that PPIs lead to a long term decrease in pain levels. PPIs have also shown remarkable success in smoking cessation programs (Kahler et. al. 2011). PPIs have been used in clinical samples also. Researchers have shown that PPIs improved well-being and decreased psychological distress in mildly depressed individuals (Seligman et.al. 2005). It has also proved its efficacy in patients with mood and depressive disorders (Fava et. al., 2003; Rashid, 2015). The role of

PPIs has also proved to be detrimental in improving quality of life and well-being in breast cancer patients (Casellas-Grau, 2014). PPIs have also shown their effectiveness in patients with psychotic disorders (Meyer, 2012). Research also suggests that use of PPIs can serve as preventive factor in developing mental disorders (Layous, Chancellor, & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013).

Implementing PPIs in schools: the need and the benefits

Schools play a vital role in framing an individual's cognitions, concepts and capabilities. They are responsible for disseminating knowledge, wisdom and information. They can be utilized as centers for building holistically groomed and flourishing individuals as a major segment of one's formative and critical developmental period is spent in schools. The new education policy stresses the need for a generation that moves beyond the limited scope of education and utilizes its capacities to the fullest. The NEP strenuously states that the education pattern should be an amalgamation of foundational skills like numeracy and literacy, higher order skills like problem solving and critical thinking and social and emotional skills like interpersonal relationships, effective management of stress, empathy and grit etc. The aim of education is supposed to be all round development and holistic growth. The NEP is in the favor of implementing a comprehensive educational system and hence is open to inclusion of programs that favor the aforementioned principles of education.

The rationale of positive psychology is in alignment with the concept of encyclopedic development of students. One of the major aims of the positive psychology movement, since its advent, has been the application of its assumptions in schools. Martin Seligman coined the term "positive education" to refer to a pattern of education that is aimed at academic learning as well as enhancement of well being (Seligman et al., 2009). According to White and Kern, any empirical positive-psychology intervention that is designed for the school scenario with the objective of increasing a student's well-being may be classified as an offshoot of positive education (White & Kern, 2018). Interventions based on the assumptions of positive psychology are aimed at enhancing positive traits and strengths among the students as well as the teachers to enhance their motivation to learn and teach (Slemp et al., 2017)

The research supporting inclusion of positive psychology interventions and demonstrating benefits of the same in schools is overwhelming. The research conducted by Bolier et. al (2013) and Waters (2011) advocate the case that not only PPIs are easy to implement in schools but at the same time they can effectively increase well-being and reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety. A study targeted towards enhancing subjective wellbeing of students was conducted by Lenz et.al. (2020) that resulted in increased life satisfaction with a medium effect size. Similar results were seen in studies conducted by Ruit et al. (2019), Wingate et al., (2018) and Tunariu et al., (2017). The results of these studies led to improvements in life satisfaction, self-reported well-being (physical and emotional) and health-related quality of life. In a study by Shum et al. (2019) improved mental health was observed in students after the intervention and at the 6-month follow-up. Significant improvement was observed in self reported general wellbeing and subjective wellbeing in a study involving mindfulness-based intervention (Devcich et al., 2017). A study implementing the intervention for hope and gratitude on students in a school based study increased life satisfaction, with a moderate effect size, and decreased depressive symptoms (Kwok et al., 2016). Shoshani and Slone (2017) proposed positive psychology interventions for preschool students which intended to stimulate the positive variables based on PERMA model. This PPI program designed for preschoolers led to better adaptive functioning in preschool, expression of behaviors aimed at learning, empathy, prosocial behavior and increased well-being. Carter et. al.(2018) conducted a study that involved

group intervention based on positive psychology as well as individual interaction with the students. The study showed a positive effect on wellbeing and a decrease in depressive symptoms.

Conclusion

The myriad of research on the topic demonstrates the vitality of implementing PPIs in schools. The results are abundant and of utmost importance. Within the population of students, mental health related issues are on the rise which is an alarming situation. Solutions that lead to sustainable wellbeing are the need of the hour. PPIs are strategies that are cost effective, they are malleable as per need for individual client or for group settings and they can be used in both clinical and non clinical settings. As PPIs are associated with positive traits enhancement, they are free from the stigma that is often associated with mental health and also they are quick to yield results (Lambert D'raven et al., 2014; Bolier et al., 2013; Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010; Seligman et al., 2005; Lambert D'raven & Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2011). PPIs enable us to cultivate sustainable happiness and wellbeing through easy and effective activities. The NEP is in favor of implementing an education pattern that is not myopic in its approach rather which empower the individually in a holistic fashion, one which favors all round development- physical, psychological, social, moral and social development. PPIs can work as an effective tool in materializing this aim of holistic development. They can be easily understood by the students and are generally easy to implement in school settings. Although PPIs are not insulated from negative or neutral outcomes, there are studies that have yielded mixed results; it is still overall favorable and advantageous to implement PPIs. They have proved their utility across genders, age and settings and can be a vital part of the state of the art education system.

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