

Positive Psychology School Intervention Program - Syllabus

1. Introduction to Positive Psychology

Throughout human history people have grappled with the question of human happiness, from a religious, scientific and spiritual perspective. For scientific answers we turn to the field of Psychology, where research provides a number of ideas and tools that promote the happiness and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Many of these stem from the relatively young research field of Positive Psychology. Positive Psychology deals with the optimal functioning of individuals and groups, and the factors that promote positive emotions, positive character traits, self-fulfillment and success. In the last ten years there has been a burgeoning in popularity of positive psychology - in the field of education, therapy and organizational behavior. The introductory session exposes participants to the core ideas of positive psychology, forming the foundation of the program.

2. Change is Possible - From Theory to Practice

All children dream. Many imagine that one day they will be someone completely different. Their dreams also continuously change. To some extent, the tension between who we want to be and who we are, persists throughout our lives. However, between the ages of adolescence and adulthood, our sense of identity grows stronger and with it, our acceptance of the limitations and constraints dictated by our circumstances and realistic possibilities. The session reveals the power of belief in change. The lesson presents research-based educational interventions, that brought about far-reaching positive changes among students and teachers. A case study will be used to demonstrate important elements in the process of achieving change in our lives.

3. Permission to be Human

A fundamental assumption in theory, research, and clinical practice relating to emotion regulation is that it is helpful to process and work through negative emotions. In addition, the ability to express and analyze one's emotions evoked by unpleasant experiences has been associated with diverse physical and mental health benefits.

However, many people prefer to hide negative emotions, and choose different psychological mechanisms that reduce the role of negative emotions. Completion is a prerequisite for a healthy and authentic emotional life. When we accept our feelings and welcome our intrinsic humanity, a mental space is opened in which we can feel the range of emotions associated with the experience. The session deals with the ability to allow ourselves the permission and space to feel and express the full range of human emotions.

4. Positive Emotions

The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions (Fredrickson 1998) states that certain discrete positive emotions - including joy, interest, contentment, pride, and love - have the ability to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their personal resources. These resources encompass physical, intellectual, social and psychological attributes. Many studies indicate that the experiences which include intense positive emotions promote creativity, resilience, social integration and physical health. The session is about the value of finding the positive and the contribution of positive emotions to achieving psychological growth and improved mental and physical health.

5. From Beliefs to Reality

The ideas that "Words create worlds" and "Thoughts create reality" have attracted considerable research interest in psychological literature over the past century. Studies have identified mechanisms and variables that explain the ability to turn beliefs into reality, including: positive expectations, optimism and hope, focus, positive interpretation of events, and a flexible mindset. The session deals with the relationship between beliefs and reality in the personal and educational context.

6. Choosing What to Focus on

In everyday life, countless people experience successes and failures - from a championship victory to a low test score, from winning a valuable prize to a breakup. How will these events affect us? Psychological literature shows that the effect of events is not so much related to the severity or objective real impact of the events, but rather to the subjective interpretation of events. Studies conclude that the way people perceive the world is much more significant to their happiness than their objective life circumstances. The session discusses the role of focus and interpretation in creating our reality.

7. Gratitude as a Way of Life

Throughout history, spiritual traditions, philosophic attitudes, and religious teachings such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, have stressed the importance of gratitude. Gratitude is defined as a feeling, emotion or attitude resulting from recognition of future, contemporary or previous benefits received. The ability to appreciate or be grateful is the opposite of taking reality for granted. This ability inspires us and enables us to see the beauty of the world, the beauty of life and the wonder of creation. Many studies indicate that simple exercises of gratitude yield significant improvement in feelings of satisfaction and wellbeing. The purpose of the session is to provide tools that cultivate feelings of gratitude and appreciation among the participants.

8. Personal Strengths

Strengths are defined as positive character traits, based on values which can be fostered and cultivated over time. Theories about the nature of good character appeared over two thousand years ago in the ancient roots of ethics, philosophy and religion. In recent years, research about the impact of character, virtues and moral qualities on cultivating strengths and promoting wellbeing has gained renewed interest. The purpose of the session is to enable participants to identify the strengths of their character, i.e. traits that represent their natural talents and give them strength and enthusiasm. In addition, the session is designed to increase participants' awareness of aspects of life that can be promoted to make optimal use of unique character strengths.

9. Setting and Implementing Personal Goals

According to research people who set goals tend to be happier and more successful. However, not all goals achieve the same result. Some people become enslaved to a goal that is not of their choosing, making them less rather than more satisfied with their life. In this session we discuss self-concordant goals, pursued out of deep personal conviction or a strong interest. Also, we discuss the formulation and planning of meaningful personal goals, based on personal strengths, that yield self-realization and wellbeing.

10. Mind and Body in Educational Work

The question of the relation between body and mind, so popular in the current time, stems way back to a past era. Hippocrates, the great healer and philosopher of ancient Greece, and the father of Western medicine, argued that "It is more important to know what kind of person carries the disease than to know what disease a person has". In recent decades, the reciprocal effects of physical and psychological processes have been extensively studied. On one hand, the mind is affected by the body - so that functional decline in health may adversely affect mood and mental symptoms. On the other hand, the body is affected by the mind - depending on the connections that exist between psychological variables such as mood disorders and states of internal stress and chronic diseases. The session addresses the need for balance between mind and body, and the importance of sleep, nutrition, physical exercise, emotional balance and mindfulness in one's personal life and educational work.

11. Stress and Flow

Our modern lifestyle is characterized as a "Stress Era". Stress is prevalent throughout the Western world, where high expectations and a desire for achievement impair the quality and health of vast numbers of people around the world. The psychological literature often deals with the question: "Why is the phenomenon of stress so prevalent today?". Although this important question has great research value the phenomenon is not well understood. Positive psychology studies deal with another question: "What are the characteristics of people who do manage to implement a healthy, peaceful and happy lifestyle?". The session provides research-based tools that enable participants to use their experiences and even their stress to increase the flow of peace within themselves, and within others.

12. Perfectionism and Self-Acceptance

For a perfectionist, life is an endless craving for achievement. Perfectionism involves the obsessive pursuit of perfection that is often associated with mood and eating disorders. Perfectionism is identified as an obstacle to creativity, productivity, self realization and mental health. It interferes with the performance of tasks due to an exhausting preoccupation with detail. It impairs people's ability to examine a task with perspective. In addition, perfectionism is associated with a high fear of failure. The session deals with issues of control attributed to oneself and others, and with self-acceptance. It focuses on the ability to deal with failures, and to grow from them. It incorporates case studies of well-known figures from science, politics and sports throughout history.

13. Relationships and Social Support

Two key researchers in the literature of positive psychology conducted research that compared extremely happy people with a control group of people who were not happy (Diener & Seligman, 2002). When the researchers examined the characteristics of the happy group, they found that they differ radically from the others in respect of their rich and satisfying social life. They were characterized by close relationships and intimate friendships. Similar findings were obtained from studies in the field of resilience. Populations in situations of crisis and risk have shown the ability to cope and function well, despite the difficult circumstances, in situations where they experienced strong social and family support. Positive supportive relationships are the foundation of resilience and mental wellbeing. The purpose of the session is to promote positive relationships with friends, family and other members in the community, and to encourage the creation of positive functional environments.

14. Acceptance of Others, Tolerance and Listening

How a person relates to individuals and groups forms part of the mental and moral infrastructure underlying feelings of satisfaction, love and happiness. The famous quote of Voltaire (French philosopher and author) - "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it" - represents the essence of tolerance. Tolerance is the recognition of the dignity of man and his freedom to be different from others, to believe, to think and to act his own way, regardless of religion, race, gender, nationality, color and faith. The purpose of the session is to cultivate sensitivity towards others, and the involvement of participants in promoting other individuals and groups in the world.

15. Pay It Forward

Sometimes a stranger passing by enriches our lives with a simple human gesture; "...like the old woman who returned your purse yesterday, like a small child who showed you the wonder of a little thing, like the poor person who offered to share his meal with you, or like a stranger who happened to be there just as you lost your way." (Yossi Front) Studies show that kindness towards others contributes substantially to increasing happiness. This session is intended to provide a space for sharing insights and processes that occurred during the program, from a personal and interpersonal perspective. Participants explore options to apply these insights and processes socially and communally.