

## **A Positive Psychology Course and Students' Well-Being**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to assess the effects of completing a Positive Psychology course on students' self-reported measures of forgiveness, gratitude, happiness, life satisfaction, meaning, and optimism. Students reported significant increases in scores on measures of gratitude, happiness, life satisfaction, and forgiveness at the end compared to the beginning of the course. Completing this course may have had a positive impact on students' psychological well-being and adding a positive psychology course to the curriculum can provide academic learning about the field and can serve as a source for learning strategies for improving psychological functioning.

### **Introduction**

I have taught Positive Psychology for more than twelve years, and throughout that time, I have received numerous anecdotal reports from students about how they believed that the course had improved the quality of their lives in personal, academic, and professional areas of functioning. They particularly described that they increased their optimism, happiness, and gratitude following the focused study of these topics in class and that they also used these positive thoughts and emotions in enhancing the efficacy of their coping with stressful challenges throughout the semester. Even several years after they completed the course, students have contacted me about the important role that positive psychology continued to play in their personal and professional lives. It was these reports from students that prompted me to develop the present research to study the positive changes in their psychological well-being that students reported experiencing related to the course.

Facing ongoing academic and personal stressors throughout their undergraduate careers, the need to help students develop evidence-based strategies for strengthening their psychological functioning is ever present. In a study conducted by the World Health Organization to assess the prevalence of psychological disorders in college students in 8 countries, of the 13,984 participants who were first year students, 35% reported experiencing at least one of the listed disorders in their lifetimes and 31% reported experiencing at least one of the disorders in the last 12 months. The most commonly endorsed disorders were major depression, mania/hypomania, generalized anxiety disorders, panic disorder, alcohol use disorder, and substance use disorder (Auerbach et al., 2018). Many students benefit from and require psychotherapy to address their

psychological challenges. A Positive Psychology course, while providing knowledge about research in the growing discipline of positive psychology, also may provide strategies for helping students to strengthen their psychological well-being and their functioning in other domains of their lives.

### **A Short History of Positive Psychology**

Modern Western psychology typically has focused on identifying and researching negative aspects of the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors of individuals and groups, toward developing strategies to initiate change and ameliorate distress. This has resulted in much progress in areas such as developing diagnoses of psychological disorders and evidence-based treatments, understanding the effects of divorce on families, and identifying factors that contribute to the development of prejudice. Psychology had not, however, focused much attention on recognizing and increasing positive characteristics in people, groups, and organizations until late in the twentieth century when the field of positive psychology began emerging within the discipline of psychology.

In describing the developing science of positive psychology, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) wrote: "The aim of positive psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities." (p.5). They explained further:

The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic. (p.5)

In their definition of positive psychology, Sheldon and King (2001) added:

What is positive psychology? It is nothing more than the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues. Positive psychology re- visits "the average person," with an interest in finding out what works, what is right, and what is improving. It asks, "What is the nature of the effectively functioning human being, who successfully applies evolved adaptations and learned skills? And how can psychologists explain the fact that, despite all the difficulties, the majority of people manage to live lives of dignity and purpose? (p. 216)

The scientific study of positive psychology has led to a greater understanding of adaptive functioning and thriving for individuals and organizations, along with strategies for improving people's lives and societal institutions. As part of the growth of the field, the number of academic courses on positive psychology has increased, including scholarship regarding descriptions and pedagogies of these courses (Froh & Parks, 2013; Kim-Prieto & D'Oriano, 2011; Pedrotti, 2011; Rich, 2011; Russo-Netzer & Ben-Shahar, 2011; Thomas & McPherson, 2011).

### **Description of Positive Psychology Course**

Consistent with Biswas-Diener and Patterson's (2011) perspective that "...positive psychology is best taught with attention to scientific research as well as practical uses of the content." (p. 480), the pedagogy of my Positive Psychology course included the following components:

#### *Lectures and Discussions of Theories and Research*

The topics of focus for the course included happiness, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, optimism, positive thinking, hope, character strengths, talents, interests, abilities, accomplishments, savoring, pleasure, positive emotions, flow, wellness, mental health, resilience, virtues, positive interpersonal relationships, love, positive families, positive schools, positive workplaces, positive societies, and positive religion.

#### *Applied Components*

These exercises involved students applying positive psychology strategies and techniques to their own experiences and then writing reflection papers regarding these experiences. For example, students identified their character strengths via an online questionnaire, used their top strengths in new ways for one week, and wrote about their experiences.

#### *Positive Psychology in Action Group Presentations*

Working in small groups, students developed programs to implement positive psychology techniques to improve the quality of life at the individual, group, or societal level. Examples of presentations included improving mental health in marriage, identifying the positive psychological effects of meditation, increasing gratitude and optimism in relationships, and improving resilience in elementary school students.

### **Method**

#### *Participants*

The participants were 28 undergraduate students enrolled in two sections of my Positive Psychology senior seminar at a small liberal arts college in the northeast United States. Participants included 20 women (71.4%) and 8 men (28.6%), and 24 participants (85.7%) were 21 or 22 years old, with an age range from 20-35.

#### *Measures*

The outcome measures of forgiveness, gratitude, happiness, life satisfaction, meaning, and optimism were chosen because all of these topics were a focus in lectures and discussions in class, while the topics of happiness and optimism also were a focus of experiential exercises and reflection papers. The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson, et al., 2005) was used to measure forgiveness. This scale was comprised of 18 questions with three embedded subscales that measured forgiveness of self, others, and situations. Participants were asked to respond to each question using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (almost always false of me) to 7 (almost always true of me). The variable of gratitude was measured by the Gratitude Questionnaire (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002), which included 6 questions assessed along a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The Subjective Happiness Scale developed by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) was employed to measure happiness. The four questions in this measure were rated by participants along a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal). As a measure of life satisfaction, the Satisfaction with Life Scale developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, (1985) was utilized. This scale consists of 5

questions and utilized a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) was used to assess participants' perspectives on meaning. This instrument included 10 questions that were rated along a 7-point scale from 1 (absolutely untrue) to 7 (absolutely true) and reflect the two underlying dimensions of presence of meaning and search for meaning. To measure participants' reported optimism, the Life Orientation Test-Revised was used (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). This questionnaire is comprised of 10 questions scored on a 5-point scale from A (I agree a lot) to E (I disagree a lot).

### *Procedure*

Students completed pre-test questionnaires during a class period in the first week of class, prior to discussion of the outcome measure topics, and they completed the post-test questionnaires during a class session in the last week of the semester. Paired sample t-test analyses were conducted to test for significant differences between participants' scores on the pre-test questionnaires compared to the post-test questionnaires.

### **Results**

Paired sample t-test analyses indicated significant differences between the pre-test vs. post-test mean scores on the measure of happiness, gratitude, life satisfaction, and forgiveness (total score). For the measure of happiness, there was a significant difference in the mean score for the pre-test ( $M = 19.464$ ,  $SD = 4.757$ ) compared to the mean score for the post-test ( $M = 21.286$ ,  $SD = 4.783$ ); ( $t = 3.613$ ;  $n = 28$ ;  $p = .001$ ), and for gratitude, there also was a significant difference in the mean score for the pre-test ( $M = 37.286$ ,  $SD = 4.602$ ) compared to the post-test ( $M = 38.964$ ,  $SD = 4.150$ ); ( $t = 3.279$ ;  $n = 28$ ;  $p = .003$ ). The additional measures with significant differences in mean scores included life satisfaction, with a mean score for the pre-test of ( $M = 25.821$ ,  $SD = 6.296$ ) compared to the post-test ( $M = 27.643$ ,  $SD = 5.539$ ); ( $t = 2.504$ ;  $n = 28$ ;  $p = .019$ ) and forgiveness (total score), with a mean score for the pre-test of ( $M = 87.464$ ,  $SD = 16.469$ ) compared to the post-test ( $M = 90.786$ ,  $SD = 13.836$ ); ( $t = 2.171$ ;  $n = 28$ ;  $p = .039$ ).

For the remaining measures, there were no significant differences between the pre-test and post-test mean scores. The paired sample t-test analyses for those measures are as follows: forgiveness (self)–mean score for the pre-test ( $M = 29.607$ ,  $SD = 6.707$ ) compared to the post-test ( $M = 31.000$ ,  $SD = 5.696$ ); ( $t = 1.705$ ;  $n = 28$ ;  $p = .100$ ); forgiveness (others)–mean score for the pre-test ( $M = 29.250$ ,  $SD = 7.387$ ) compared to the post-test ( $M = 30.679$ ,  $SD = 6.266$ ); ( $t = 1.368$ ;  $n = 28$ ;  $p = .183$ ); forgiveness (situation)–meanscore for the pre-test ( $M = 28.607$ ,  $SD = 6.828$ ) compared to the post-test ( $M = 29.107$ ,  $SD = 4.779$ ); ( $t = .667$ ;  $n = 28$ ;  $p = .511$ ); meaning (presence)–mean score for the pre-test ( $M = 25.893$ ,  $SD = 5.756$ ) compared to the post-test ( $M = 26.536$ ,  $SD = 6.669$ ); ( $t = .726$ ;  $n = 28$ ;  $p = .474$ ); meaning (search)–mean score for the pre-test ( $M = 23.821$ ,  $SD = 6.939$ ) compared to the post-test ( $M = 25.500$ ,  $SD = 7.219$ ); ( $t = 1.634$ ;  $n = 28$ ;  $p = .114$ ); meaning (total)–mean score for the pre-test ( $M = 49.750$ ,  $SD = 8.067$ ) compared to the post-test ( $M = 52.036$ ,  $SD = 8.085$ ); ( $t = 2.018$ ;  $n = 28$ ;  $p = .054$ ); and optimism–mean score for the pre-test ( $M = 22.464$ ,  $SD = 5.821$ ) compared to the post-test ( $M = 23.536$ ,  $SD = 4.993$ ); ( $t = 1.749$ ;  $n = 28$ ;  $p = .092$ ).

While all of the outcome measure topics were a focus in lectures and discussions in class, the results indicate that students' scores increased significantly on the measures of happiness,

gratitude, life satisfaction, and forgiveness following completion of this Positive Psychology course. Although the topics of happiness and optimism were also a focus of applied exercises and reflection papers, only happiness scores were significantly increased.

## **Discussion**

Compared to the beginning of the course, students at the end of the semester in the present study reported experiencing significant increases in happiness, gratitude, life satisfaction, and forgiveness. These results are consistent with previous research that measured changes in mental health-related outcomes related to completing a positive psychology course. In one study conducted in a positive psychology course, students who were engaged in experiential exercises of making decisions about increasing happiness in their lives reported positive course evaluation outcomes and comments regarding this pedagogy (Kurtz, 2011). In another study, students also reported benefiting from taking a positive psychology course, as they reported significant improvements in mindfulness, self-actualization, hope, and happiness between pre- and post-course assessments (Maybury, 2013).

In comparing students in a positive psychology class and a social psychology class, those in the positive psychology course reported significantly higher scores on post- vs. pre-course measures of happiness, life satisfaction, and approaches to happiness, with lower scores on depression and stress measures (Goodmon, Middleditch, Childs, & Pietrasiuk, 2016). In a study assessing the effects of a positive psychology course focused on character strengths, students reported significant improvements between the beginning and end of the course on measures of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment, happiness, health, loneliness, and negative emotions. These participants also evidenced significant improvements compared to students in another psychology course (Smith, Ford, Erickson, & Guzman, 2020). The results of these studies demonstrate that a positive psychology course can contribute to improving students' psychological well-being and that positive psychology courses should be considered as contributors both to expanding students' understanding of the scholarship within psychology and as a source of learning evidence-based skills in creating and increasing positive functioning.

Given the many challenges that students in higher education experience in managing their mental health, the findings that an academic course can positively affect their well-being are vitally important. Future research should continue to explore the specific aspects of positive psychology courses that contribute to improved psychological well-being for students. Based on research outcomes, it is recommended that psychology departments consider including positive psychology courses in departmental curricula and incorporate positive psychology topics into related psychology courses. Outside of psychology departments, topical modules could be developed for other majors, such as education, business, health care fields, and even for short courses for first year students on such topics as building positive coping and resilience.

Regarding the limitations of the present study, future research should include a control group comprised of students in another psychology senior seminar for comparison. All of the outcome measure topics were a focus of lectures and discussions in class, although the amount of time devoted to each topic varied. Future research should include this factor of time in analyzing results. In addition, the topics of happiness and optimism included applied exercises and reflection papers, while only happiness scores

were significantly increased. Future research should include these types of applied exercises and reflection papers for all topics to explore their role in possibly effecting change in outcome measures.

For most students in the present study, this was their final semester of college, a time marked by both positive emotions related to achievement and also typically anxiety about the future. It is notable that students achieved improvements in their psychological well-being even within the context of this anxiety. It also may be true that graduating from college and perhaps attaining employment or graduate school admission directly improved their psychological health, particularly in the areas of happiness, gratitude, and life satisfaction.

Therefore, courses and programs aimed at increasing components of positive psychological health for students might be of great service to them and may help to buffer against the stressful effects of depression, anxiety, and other psychological disorders. This information could help improve the quality of life for students in their psychological growth and thriving and also as a means of coping with a variety of stressful circumstances.

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