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Applying Positive Psychology with Adolescents: Insight from Young People

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Objectives

- Outline our research study on positive psychology and adolescent well-being.
- Present key findings.
- Discuss future directions.



Why apply positive
psychology
with adolescents?

Positive psychology and adolescents

The prevalence of mental health problems during adolescence is high (Sawyer et al., 2000; Tucci et al., 2007).

Applying positive psychology with adolescents has great potential:

- Preventing mental health problems during adolescence can avert years lost to illness and suffering as young people can learn skills and behaviours that can be useful across the life span.

Utility in educational settings:

- Good mental health is a requisite of effective learning.
- Positive psychology offers the opportunity to explore conditions that foster student engagement and interest.
- Schools offer unique potential to promote mental health.



Positive psychology and adolescents

However research in positive psychology and adolescents is only in the formative stages:

- In a meta-analysis of 49 studies of positive psychology interventions only **THREE** focused on children and adolescents under 17 (Sin & Lyubomirsky, in press).
- Furthermore, Sin and Lyubomirsky found that the success of positive psychology interventions increased with age.



Positive psychology: Insights from adolescents

Purpose:

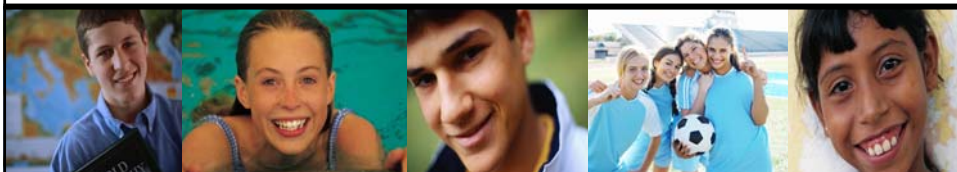
To contribute to research on positive psychology and adolescents, with a focus on identifying variables that may help young people to flourish.

Focus on five positive psychology concepts:

- Hope.
- Gratitude.
- Use of strengths.
- Positive social relationships.
- Pleasure, engagement, and meaning orientations to happiness.

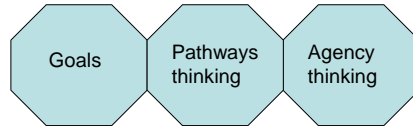
Focus on five outcome variables:

- Satisfaction with life.
- Positive affect.
- Negative affect.
- Depression.
- Anxiety.



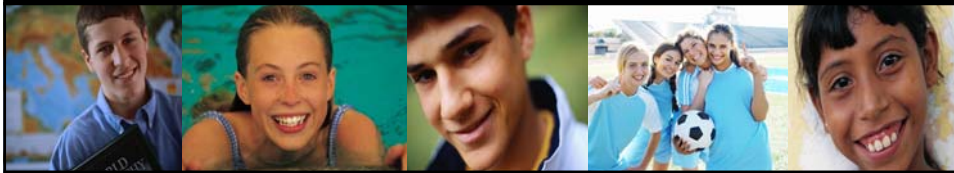
Hope

Hope is a cognitive process with three factors:



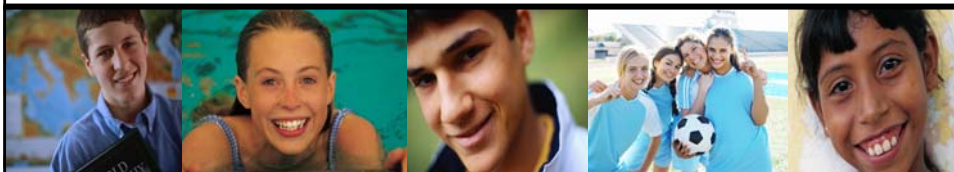
Individuals with high hope have been found:

- To report higher satisfaction with life, fewer symptoms of depression, and to cope more effectively with stressful life events (Snyder, 2002; Valle, Huebner & Suldo, 2006).
- To have higher academic satisfaction and superior academic performance (Snyder, 2003).



Gratitude

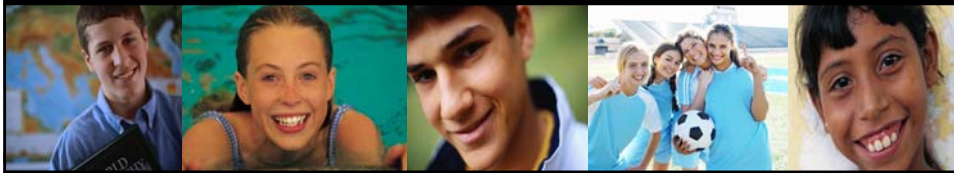
- Gratitude is defined as a tendency to react to positive events, or the benevolence of others, with grateful and thankful emotions (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002).
- Gratitude has been associated with high well-being, optimism, and satisfaction with school experience (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Sefick & Emmons, 2008)



Strengths

“Raising children is vastly more than fixing what is wrong with them, it is about identifying and nurturing their strongest qualities, what they own and are best at, and helping them find the niches in which they can live out these strengths”
(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p 4).

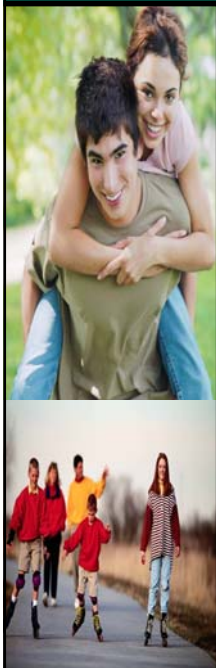
- Use of strengths has been found to have benefits for well-being (Seligman et al., 2005).
- Use of strengths in schools has been found to lead to higher academic expectations, motivation, positive academic behaviours, and perceptions of ability (Austin, 2005).



Positive Relationships

Having a strong support network is consistently linked with good mental health:

- Having friends is associated with happiness and flourishing (Diener & Seligman, 2002).
- Poor social support is a risk factor for mental health problems (Ravens-Sieberer, Erhart, Gosch, & Wille, 2008).



Orientations to Happiness



Pleasure:

- The pleasure orientation to happiness involves the maximisation of pleasant and positive experiences.



Engagement:

- The engagement orientation to happiness involves high absorption and engagement in motivating challenges.



Meaning:

- The meaning orientation to happiness involves being true to oneself, being part of something larger than oneself, and contributing to the greater good.

Positive psychology: Insights from adolescents

Participants:

- 159 adolescents (aged 14 to 17).
- The significant majority (96.9%) of participants were at secondary school.

Procedure:

- Participants completed a battery of questionnaires and an open ended questionnaire.
- Twenty eight participants completed a 20 – 30 minute follow up phone interview.



Results

Satisfaction with life:

Hope, gratitude, strengths, and social support.

Positive affect:

Hope, strengths, engagement, meaning, and pleasure.

Negative affect:

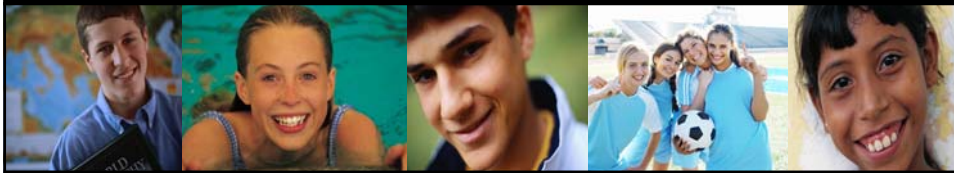
Strengths, engagement.

Depression:

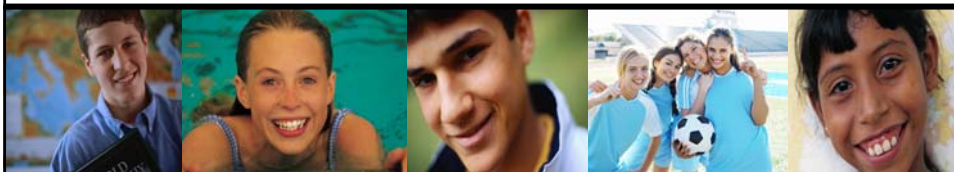
Hope, gratitude.

Anxiety:

Hope.



Qualitative Results



Nurturing Hope

Recommendations for nurturing hope:

Goals:

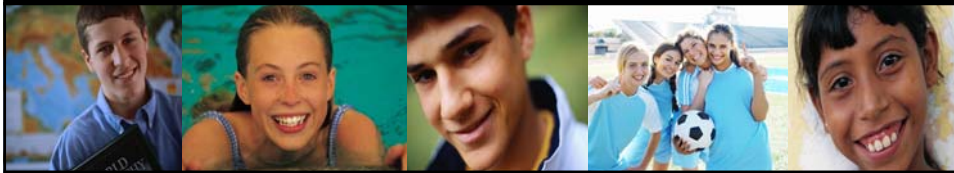
- Ensure the goals are self-concordant (i.e., aligned with the individual's true values and desires).

Pathways thinking:

- Break goals down into steps.
- Practice brainstorming several pathways to achieving the goal.
- Attribute failures to the pathway not working and NOT to a lack of skill or talent.

Agency thinking:

- Use stretch goals (i.e., goals that are progressively more challenging).
- Get young people to work in teams.



Wisdom from adolescents: Gratitude

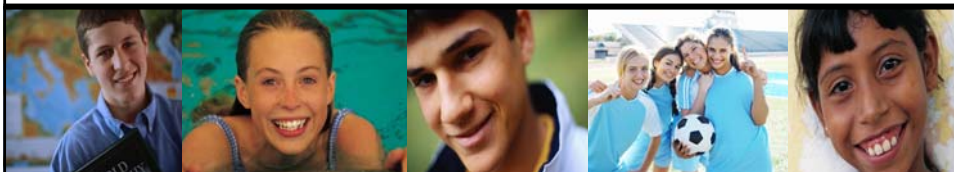
“Look at what you have and be thankful instead of wasting your time looking at what you don't have.”

Pay attention to the good things in life:

- Three blessings exercise (daily or weekly).
- 365 Grateful www.youcantbeserious.com.au

Gratitude towards others:

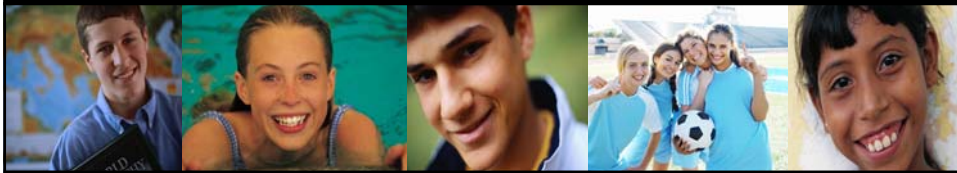
- Write a gratitude letter.
- Make an effort to thank people that are usually taken for granted.



Identifying and developing strengths

“What sort of activities do you feel help adolescents to develop their strengths?”

- Group tasks that enable you to work with others with a variety of strengths.
- Being on a team
- Trying new things.
- Talking about your strengths (e.g., with friends or in a group).
- Learning from your mistakes.
- Talking to people who have strengths you look up to
- Working on community projects.
- Working with a coach, psychologist, or mentor.



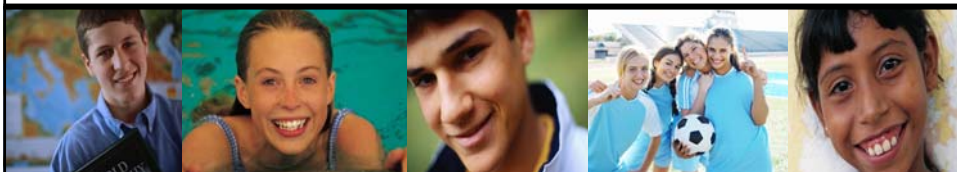
Identifying and developing strengths

Identifying strengths:

- Me at my best activity
- Strengths inventories (e.g., the Values In Action Inventory for Youth).

Developing and using strengths:

- Brainstorm ways strengths can be applied in life.
- Focus on linking strengths with success (e.g., by getting students to tell stories of times when using their strengths has lead to success) (Austin, 2005).

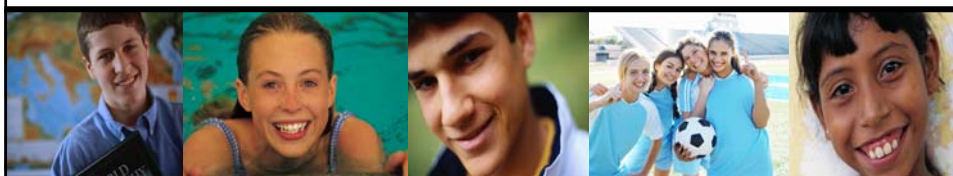


Nurturing Relationships

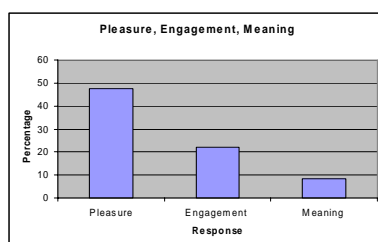
- Adolescents identified friends and family as important factors in happiness and mental health.
- For example, 67.9% of participants said that they were at their happiest when with friends and family.

Positive psychology approaches to nurturing your relationships:

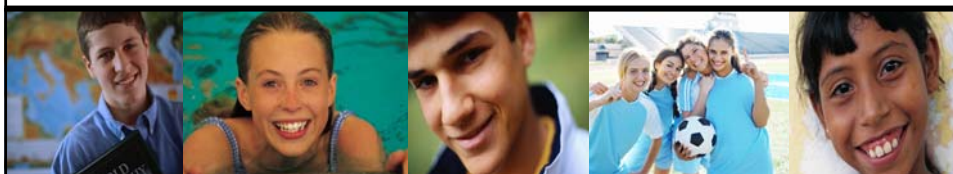
- Gratitude.
- Using strengths to enhance relationships (e.g., kindness, love, curiosity).
- Exploring the strengths of others.
- Savouring relationships.



Orientations to Happiness: Recommendations



- Participants demonstrated a preference for the pleasure orientation to happiness (which has been demonstrated to have the weakest relationship with well-being) (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Vella-Brodrick, Park, & Peterson, 2008).
- In particular, very few adolescents referred to meaning in their qualitative responses.



Orientations to Happiness: Recommendations

Pleasure:

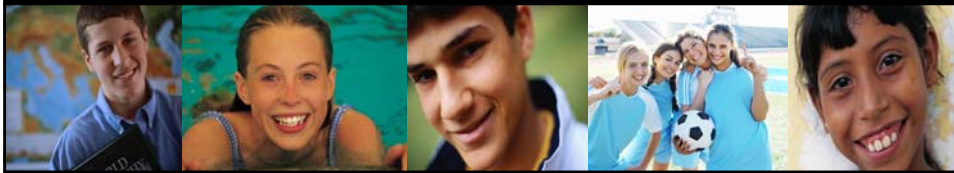
- Adolescents have pleasure down pat!

Engagement:

- Offer opportunities for young people to use their strengths more often in everyday life.
- Provide a match between task challenge and skill level.

Meaning:

- Encourage adolescents to explore potential sources of meaning in their lives.
- Provide opportunities for altruism and volunteer work.



Where to next?

- Based on the result of this research, a multi-component, positive psychology workshop is under development.
- It will be aimed at adolescents (aged 14 to 17).
- Participants will be randomly allocated to (a) the positive psychology workshop; (b) a placebo workshop; or (c) a non-intervention control group.
- The aim is to investigate whether the workshop is effective in enhancing adolescent well-being.

Seeking Participants: Positive Psychology Research

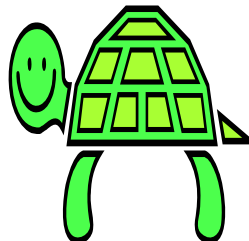
Researchers at Monash University are seeking participants (aged 14 to 17) for a study on positive psychology and adolescent mental health.

The aim of this study is to develop and test a workshop that aims to enhance young people's mental health.

To find out more, please email:

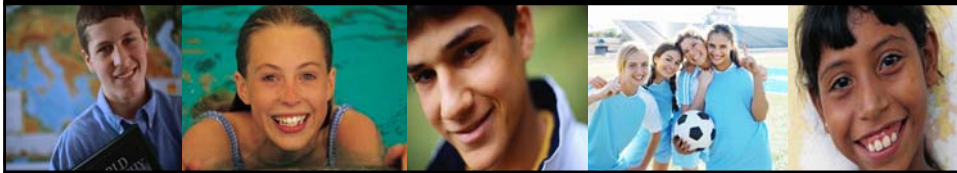
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Thank you!



In summary

- The high rates of mental health problems and low rates of flourishing in adolescents justifies efforts to promote youth mental health.
- Positive psychology has the potential to enhance adolescent mental health, however, research is only in the formative stages.
- In our study, positive psychology variables predicted variance in well-being and mental health beyond that explained by demographics, personality and life events.
- In particular, hope was the most consistent predictor of well-being.
- The next goal is to test (via a randomised controlled trial) whether a multi-component workshop helps young people to flourish.



Questions,
advice,
feedback?

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