

The Power of Positive Emotions in Challenging Times: A Positive Psychology Intervention Program

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ABSTRACT

Schools have taken the initiative to establish programs pertaining to mental health and well-being in response to the rising number of students who may face distress and mental health issues following the Covid-19 outbreak (World Health Organization, 2021). The goal of this study was to design a positive psychology group intervention program targeted at enhancing college students' subjective well-being by boosting their ability to feel good even in the face of trying circumstances. The hedonic aspect of well-being and the first component of the PERMA Theory, which is concerned with happiness as a whole, is positive emotion (Seligman, 2011). Positive mental health is anticipated to develop and flourish when pleasant feelings are nurtured. A needs and asset assessment were conducted when the proposed intervention program was being developed in order to justify its utility to the intended participants, who are first-year college students already enrolled at the institution. The framework for the experiential learning cycle was used to create the curriculum. A five-session program that can be delivered both in-person and online was developed as a result of this program development research. This program included activities that would assist participants to become aware of and build on their resources and assets that would help them deal with issues they would experience in the future, with a focus on positive feelings. This program may be piloted to assess its effectiveness.

Keywords: group intervention program, PERMA, positive psychology, subjective well-being

INTRODUCTION

College or university life can be quite stressful for some students as they may be experiencing difficulties and challenges in academics, career, personal, social, and economic. This stage also constitutes a lot of transitions including the continuous transformation and development from puberty to young adulthood. With this, college students need to cope with the challenges brought by college life as well as accomplish their developmental needs.

In addition, during the Covid-19 pandemic, a lot of college students have been severely impacted not just physically but mentally. One of the negative impacts it causes is the increased level of stress and anxiety among students (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Students with poor mental health causes distress which in return negatively influences their quality of lives and academic performance (Mofatteh, 2021). This also affects their own evaluation, perception of their lives and well-being. Given the challenges and difficulties brought by different circumstances, it is important to recognize and give importance to the mental health of students for them to still flourish and thrive.

In response to the increasing number of students who may experience distress and mental concerns, various schools have been proactive with the implementation of guidelines as well as developing programs concerning mental health and well-being. Schools provide a great opportunity to advocate mental health and emotional well-being, help prevent mental health problems, and identify and support individuals who may be experiencing problems and difficulties with their well-being (World Health Organization, 2021).

Developing well-being programs in schools facilitate students' active engagement in academic learning, therefore, improving their academic achievement, increasing their levels of happiness and enjoyment in school, and improving their levels of life satisfaction, meaning in life, and social skills (Seligman et al., 2009). Furthermore, implementing programs that will cater freshman college students is necessary given that their first years at university constitutes a crucial period for their mental health and growth, which requires learning, honing and utilizing active coping strategies to effectively adapt to their new environment (Shankland et al., 2009).

With the above stated conditions, this program development research sought to craft a program that will enhance student's well-being by helping students acquire skills that focus on increasing their positive emotions despite overwhelming situations.

PERMA Well-Being Model

To increase and promote positive mental health, Seligman's PERMA Model is used to understand well-being as well as a foundation for developing and improving it. PERMA is rooted from positive psychology, which is the constructive and optimistic concepts in life such as strengths, happiness, flourishing, and well-being. Martin Seligman, a leading positive psychologist shifted his focus on the good and positive life rather than focusing on mental illness. He proposed the PERMA Well-being Model, identifying five essential elements of well-being namely Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (Figure 1). These elements are said to be pursued by an individual because they are intrinsically motivating and that contributes to their overall well-being (Seligman, 2011). These elements work together to help an individual to flourish by making informed decisions to live a more fulfilling life that is matched with their values and interests. This is a theory of well-being explaining that well-being is not simply the absence of mental illness (Keyes, 2002), but also the presence of five pillars with the acronym of PERMA (Seligman, 2011) to increase one's flourishing. There is no one element that defines well-being as several elements contribute to it which are measured independently and allows an individual to freely choose for themselves (Seligman, 2011).

Positive emotion, the hedonic element of well-being and has the most evident conjunction to the overall concept of happiness (Seligman, 2011). Engagement is an experience wherein an individual utilizes his or her skills, strengths, and attention in a challenging task. It is about being totally absorbed by the activity that an individual enjoys and experiencing the "flow" where time seems to be unnoticed. Positive relations are defined as authentic association with others which is linked to achieving meaning and purpose in life (Seligman, 2011). It has many positive impacts on one's well-being such as having better physical health, longer life, and healthier behaviors (Tay et al., 2012; Taylor, 2011). Meaning is the fourth contributor in the PERMA, which refers to believing that life is valuable and has feelings of being connected to something greater than oneself (Steger et al., 2008). Accomplishment is the last driving force for achieving personal goals which help an individual to flourish and improve his/her well-being (Seligman, 2011). These are the PERMA elements that enable an individual to flourish and help them live a more fulfilling life that is aligned with their values and interests.

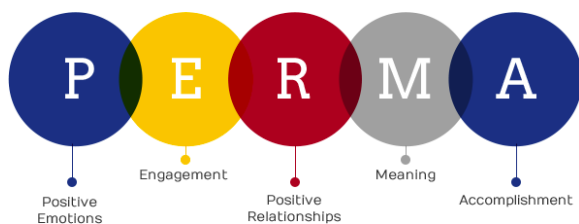


Figure 1. Seligman's Theory of Well-Being

Positive Emotions

This program anchored on positive emotions of the PERMA which is the cornerstone of well-being theory.

This is the first element in the authentic theory where well-being theory is rooted. Positive emotion is defined as having feelings of pleasure, rapture, ecstasy, warmth, comfort, and the like. Moreover, positive emotion is an affective component comprising the feelings of joy, life satisfaction, hope, pleasure, purpose, and contentment that will contribute to a more holistic mental health concept which in return may help better understand oneself and facilitate flourishing (Keyes, 2007). It plays a pivotal role in helping an individual adjust, make friends, and engage in proactive social relationships with others (Phan et al., 2019) and are positively related to life satisfaction, resilience, mindfulness, social rewards, work outcomes, and physical health (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2009).

Positive emotions can help enhance future growth and success (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2012) and allow individuals to live well, renew one's energy and rejuvenate (Seligman, 2011). In addition, positive emotions are active ingredients within trait resilience that fuels thriving after experiencing overwhelming situations (Fredrickson et al., 2003). Furthermore, it improves psychological resources including resilience, thus, leading to enhanced subjective well-being over time, but considering a moderation in engaging in activities that makes them feel good about themselves (Nguyen & Fredrickson, 2017). It is also not just the act of smiling but is more about finding the ability to keep an optimistic view of certain events and circumstances that people face in one's lives (Hill, 2020).

In addition, a person experiencing positive emotions helps uplift a good mood which can cultivate a resilient mindset. According to Israelashvili (2021) positive emotions are significantly important to mental health especially when an individual is in distress which is reflected in the increased levels of negative emotional experiences. Likewise, a person who possesses positive emotions is able to focus on the positive aspects of life during times of distress and can demonstrate high resilience to recover quickly from negative psychological experiences (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

Fredrickson (2001) suggested that cultivating positive emotions helps prepare an individual for future challenges. Experiencing it leads to states of mind and to modes of behavior that indirectly prepare an individual for later hard times (Fredrickson & Cohn, 2010). It is also a prime indicator of flourishing which can be cultivated or learned that will help improve one's well-being (Fredrickson, 2001). Further, characteristics like confidence, optimism, and self-efficacy, physical well-being, and effective coping with challenge and stress are associated with positive affect (Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005). When an individual exhibits these characteristics and experiences positive emotions, they are likely to actively engage and pursue their goals.

Research Problems

In order to come up with the proposed program, the following are the research questions that guided this program development research:

1. What evidence-based psychological framework can serve as a theoretical foundation in developing a program that cultivates mentally healthy students?
2. What evidence-based intervention program can be proposed that will focus on promoting positive emotion?

METHODS

The method that was utilized in the development of the program followed three (3) key processes: 1) Needs and Asset Assessment or Situational Analysis; 2) Program Design; and 3) Program Development. Needs and asset assessment is implemented to ensure the needs have not changed and the existing program is still addressing the needs of the university students; understanding the full complexity of needs that will support the design and development of appropriate programs for university students; and understanding the assets

and strengths of the population that will contribute to appropriate program design and development. Needs and asset assessment is done through extensive review of related studies, individual interview among selected freshman college students, and consultation with stakeholders. The second step is Program Design which is an iterative process involving research, consultation, initial design, testing and redesign. It is a plan of action that results from that process. The last step is the Program Development which is the identification of goals, content, and the actual development of modules.

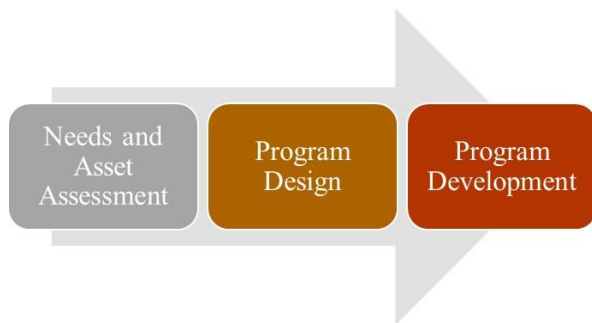


Figure 2. Program Development Process

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The outcome of this study is an intervention program design on cultivating happiness by means of promoting positive emotions. The program is designed to develop positive psychology group intervention intended to increase the Subjective Well-Being by utilizing Seligman's framework for increasing positive emotions. This is a five-session program designed to teach college students a set of skills that will help them be aware of their personal resources which they can utilize in regulating and managing their emotions in challenging situations.

To fulfill these goals, the intervention program is committed to help college students attain this by:

1. Developing an understanding on positive emotion and its significant impacts on well-being;
2. Defining happiness and become aware of their physical, intellectual, psychological, and social resources that may help lessen one's vulnerability to experiencing unwanted emotions; and
3. Being equipped and prepared with the necessary life skills that may be of help in regulating their emotions when under overwhelming situations.

This program is designed to cater to freshman students who are currently enrolled at the university. Students who are experiencing difficulties in regulating their emotions and dealing with challenging situations are included in the program. Moreover, those students who expressed their willingness and commitment to attend and finish all sessions of the positive intervention group are included. Students with severe pathologies, with suicidal tendencies and with physical disabilities are excluded as participants of the program.

The program can be delivered on two (2) platforms: face to face or online. For the face-to-face set-up students and facilitators can interact with each other physically in a well-ventilated room that can accommodate eight to ten students. This program can also be conducted in an online platform such as Zoom or Google Meet wherein members are required to use their school email account when joining in.

In the development of learning modules, the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) was adapted. In the experiential learning cycle, learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Key areas of the module that are given emphasis are experiencing, processing, and integration. The flow of activities begins from mood check up to a back home application.

Flow of Activities (Adapted from Experiential Learning Cycle)

1. Mood check
2. Orientation
3. Review of previous session / processing of homework
4. Discuss the goals and objectives of each session/agenda
5. Instructions/Brief Lecture
6. Experiencing
7. Processing Questions (Cognitive, Affective, Behavioral)
8. Summary and Synthesis
9. Back Home Application

Further, the program is divided into five modules. Module 1 (Introduction, Orientation, and Psychoeducation on positive psychology) talks about creating the participant's awareness of one's strengths and qualities that may be of help to lessen their vulnerability to experiencing unwanted emotions and gain understanding on the basics of positive psychology. The first session serves as an orientation of the general objectives of the five-session positive psychology group intervention. Ground rules (e.g. respect, confidentiality), members' rights, and setting of expectations and other concerns will be discussed and clarified. This is also the introduction of the facilitator and group members to get to know each other and be able to build rapport among them. There will also be psychoeducation on Positive Psychology. As a back home application, an infographic will be provided that will help participants be reminded of some exercises and activities that will help increase well-being. Participants will be encouraged to engage in one of the activities listed in that infographic and observe and list what are their thoughts and feelings after they experience it.

Module 2 (Well-Being, PERMA, and its importance) focuses on developing understanding on PERMA Theory of Well-Being and its usefulness in flourishing and to recognize the importance and positive impacts of PERMA and well-being in daily life. The second session will allow each participant to be aware of the elements of PERMA that will help them develop healthy ways to cope with challenging situations. Part of the activities in this module are the psychoeducation of the PERMA Model and a self-reflection on mapping the happiness of participants. Participants will be asked to create a Gratitude Journal by logging in and writing "Three Good Things" as part of the practical application after completing this module.

Module 3 (Understanding Emotions) stresses on understanding emotions and behaviors, moods and impulses and how to manage them in a positive way; gaining an understanding on the concept of Positive Emotions and its significance in coping with stressful and difficult situations; reflecting on the things that they had experienced which allows them to increase positive emotions by expressing gratefulness and appreciation; and awareness of oneself and surroundings and practice mindfulness. There are 3 key activities in this module. The first activity is all about psychoeducation on emotions that differentiates what are affective states, moods, and emotions and their characteristics. Then an activity on experiencing positive emotions or positive reminiscence will encourage the participants to do something pleasurable for themselves every day. And the last activity is about psychoeducation and practice skills on mindfulness. Ending this module is an assignment on practicing deep breathing at home. Participants will be given a copy of the ideas/list on how to practice mindfulness in everyday life, encourage them to do it and write a reflection about the experience.

Module 4 (Cultivating Positive Emotions in difficult times) focuses on identifying and utilizing the participant's personal resources that will help them deal with difficult situations. Mindfulness and emotion regulation skills will be introduced that will help them be grounded and practice to focus their attention on the present moment and manage their emotions when under pressure. Members will also be asked to reflect on things that make them feel good about themselves and develop healthy ways to respond to stress. Module

4 presents activities related to emotion regulation which is a Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) skill that will help us understand the function of emotions, the action urge that accompanies each emotion, and whether to heed or oppose these urges. The emotion regulation skills that will be learned in this module will help the participants reduce vulnerability, increase resiliency against unwanted emotions, and improve overall mental health.

Module 5 (Summary, Evaluation, and Termination) summarized the participants own meaning of happiness, evaluate whether the skills they learned in the group sessions have helped the participants in managing their emotions, and come up with plan for follow up or referral if needed. The last session will focus on reviewing past sessions that will allow them to be equipped with necessary life skills when faced with difficult emotions or situations in the future. For the activities in Module 5, participants will define their own meaning of happiness and positive emotion in a creative way. They can express themselves through art or writing. A self-care tool kit will also be prepared by the participants by creating a list of pleasurable experiences and a list of things or activities that they do for self-care that will enhance the likelihood of the participants being consciously aware when positive emotions are present. Engaging in pleasurable and meaningful activities will help participants be aware and build on their personal resources and assets that will help them deal with adversities. Also, engaging in activities that will make them feel good about themselves help increase their positive emotions, thus, improving overall well-being.

Participants will be required to complete an assessment developed by the researcher to assess the program's efficacy at the last session. To be more precise, a Likert scale will be used to assess if the objectives are satisfied in terms of the module's content, delivery method, activities, and tactics. Additionally, a qualitative component will be included by asking the participants to write down any new insights they had after attending all five sessions. At the conclusion of each session, the facilitator records the various procedures, participation, group dynamics, and personal learning insights. This will make it easier to track participant progress and determine whether the goals are being met.

In order to address their mental health issues and enhance their well-being, the participants who will require additional assessment, individual counseling, or other therapeutic intervention will be properly referred to a psychologist or psychiatrist.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this proposed positive psychology intervention program will be able to help college students as they deal with academic, personal-social, and career changes. Further, the proposed program will seek to develop attitudes and skills that emphasize increasing positive emotions in the face of challenging circumstances that will contribute to improving students' well-being. To assess the efficacy of the modules, it is recommended that the modules be implemented to the freshman college student population and evaluate the behavioral outcomes of students who have participated in the program. The difference between students who participated in a face to face or online platform of the module can also be examined to find out which platform results in a better outcome. It is also suggested that modules that will cover other components of PERMA aside from positive emotions will also go through module development process. By this, the entire PERMA framework will have available modules to be implemented among students. This program development research was conducted as a way to apply positive psychology to a real life setting that is through school-based mental health services. Adolescents that exhibit the highest results in social, intellectual, and physical health domains are those who have high subjective well-being and lack psychopathology, hence it is crucial to identify and provide positive psychological intervention to students in these areas (Suldo and Shaffer 2008).

DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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