A Primer in Positive Psychology

The Mission
To understand and build the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive.

The Rationale
During its first century, psychology focused most of its attention on human suffering. The understanding and treatment of psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, and phobias are examples of the progress made through the study of psychology. While alleviating human suffering is a worthy goal, psychology neglected the study of what makes life worth living.

Positive Psychology is founded on the belief that people want more than ending suffering. People want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play. Positive Psychology not only heals psychological damage but also builds strengths to enable people to achieve the best things in life.

Why Positive Education at Coe College?
The high prevalence of depression among college students, the small rise in life satisfaction, and the synergy between learning and positive emotion make it readily apparent that skills for happiness should be taught in school. There is substantial evidence from well controlled studies that skills that increase resilience, positive emotion, engagement, and meaning can be taught to students. Positive Psychology interventions have been proven to:
- Create campus environments focused on well-being where students flourish in all aspects of their lives.
- Create workplaces that foster satisfaction and high productivity.
- Establish communities that encourage civic engagement.

The Three Pillars
Positive psychology has three central concerns: positive experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions.

Understanding positive emotions entails the study of contentment with the past, happiness in the present, and hope for the future. Understanding positive individual traits consists of the study of the strength of virtues: the capacity to love and work, courage, compassion, resilience, creativity, curiosity, integrity, self-knowledge, moderation, self-control, and wisdom. Understanding positive institutions entails the study of the strengths that foster better communities, such as justice, responsibility, civility, nurturance, work ethic, leadership, teamwork, purpose, and tolerance.

Sample Interventions backed by research (Goal: Build Enduring Personal Resources)
Focus on one of these every day for a week:
- Three Good Things – What went well today and why? (Increases mindfulness & self-regulation)
- Three Funny Things
- Three reasons you are grateful
- Counting Kindness (Random Acts of Kindness Week)
- Gift of Time – Set meetings with three people you care about this week.
- Understanding and development of 24 character strengths

Other Interventions:
- ABC model – How beliefs (B) about an adversity (A) – and not the adversity itself – cause the consequence (C) feelings.
- One Door Closes, One Door Opens – Write about a negative life event that led to unforeseen positive outcomes.
- Gratitude visit – Write and deliver a letter of gratitude to a person you are grateful to, but you have never thanked appropriately.
- Resilience and Grit Development – the capacity to respond quickly and constructively to adversity or positive events. (Barbara Fredrickson’s upward spirals)
- Values in Action (VIA) Model – Understand and develop 24 character strengths (see attached page).
Resources


Haidt, J. (May 7, 2002). It's more fun to work on strengths than weaknesses (but it may not be better for you). (contains list of activities for 24 signature strengths)


