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## Positive Counseling with College Students

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Positive Counseling with College Students

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### Abstract

College students face multiple challenges and can find college life to be overwhelming at times. In this paper, we examine how positive psychology, which embraces a strengths-based focus, has much to offer college students and their counselors. After providing an overview of positive psychology, we examine how positive psychology can be integrated into counseling generally and then more specifically into working with college students. We examine a number of different issues that college students face, and we offer different positive psychology techniques that have been found to be beneficial. Moreover, we provide a case study to demonstrate the benefits of taking a positive psychology approach to enhance counseling effectiveness. We also give attention to the potential benefits of taking a strengths-based approach to improving student retention and to how positive psychology can be applied to enhance the well-being of the counselor.

*Keywords:* positive psychology, positive counseling, college students, strengths, broaden and build, gratitude, forgiveness, resilience, flow

### Positive Counseling with College Students

Mental health counselors have a distinguished history of focusing on client strengths (Gladding, 2013). Recent work in the field of positive psychology, which shares this same strengths-based focus, has much to offer mental health counselors by way of theoretical formulations, research findings, and counseling techniques (e.g., Davidson, 2014; Garland, et al., 2010; Harris, Thoresen, & Lopez, 2007; Larsen & Stege, 2012; Leppma, 2012; Lubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Niemec, Rashid, & Spinella, 2012; Rash, Matsuba, & Prkachin, 2011; Sears & Kraus, 2009; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) launched the positive psychology movement with their influential paper, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," published in the *American Psychologist*. Since that time, hundreds of articles and numerous books have been published on positive psychology. Positive psychology is considered to be an interdisciplinary undertaking, and counselors have played a prominent role in advancing knowledge in this field (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Positive psychology grew out of an awareness that much of the psychological research in the 20<sup>th</sup> century focused on what is wrong with us. Simply stated, positive psychology focuses on what is right with us. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi explain, positive psychology is interested in how well-being can be enhanced by positive emotions, human virtues, and positive institutions. Well-being includes an appreciation for the value of living a) the pleasant life, in which life circumstances and personal qualities enable us to experience happiness as a desired state; b) the engaged life, which involves active involvement in activities (e.g. work, leisure, social); and c) the meaningful life in which we transcend our own self-interests and preoccupations, giving to, and being involved in, something

greater than ourselves (Seligman, 2002; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). Counselors are in a privileged position to help clients enhance well-being in all three of these areas.

The idea of well-being and incorporating it into our lives is not new. The roots of positive psychology can be traced to the early Greek philosopher, Aristotle (354 BC—322 BC), who, in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1962), emphasized the value of virtuous living and distinguished between happiness that comes from momentary pleasure (hedonia) and more enduring happiness that derives from self-realization (eudaimonia). Aristotle's concept of self-realization is similar to that of self-actualization as described by Maslow (1970) and Rogers (1980) and includes an emphasis on the value of authentic living. Aristotle maintained that the pathway to joy is the daily exercise of strengths associated with virtues. After surveying the world's literature covering a 3,000 year period, Peterson and Seligman (2004) identified six virtues they consider to be universal: wisdom and knowledge, love and humanity, courage, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Peterson and Seligman also identified four strengths associated with each virtue and developed an inventory for measuring those strengths, the Values in Action Classification of Strengths (VIA). The VIA, which has good reliability and validity, is available free online at <http://www.viastrengths.org>, and has been found to be helpful in counseling (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005) and educational (Shushok & Hulme, 2006) settings. Some colleges are even beginning to incorporate the VIA into their admission packets for new students. Counselors are well-positioned to help clients to become more aware of and to develop their strengths and to gain self-understanding that can lead to greater self-realization.

Frederickson's (2001) broaden-and-build model of positive emotion has important applications to the counseling process and is an excellent example of how a positive psychology approach can enhance current approaches to counseling. According to this model, which has received considerable empirical support, negative emotions narrow our focus while positive emotions expand possibilities. Increasing positive emotions can help to a) open clients up to new thoughts and behaviors, b) help build internal positive resources that clients can utilize during times of increased stress, and c) undo the effects of negative emotions. What this model suggests is that increasing positive emotions in counseling, in addition to or as an alternative to focusing on negative symptoms, can lead to improvement in functioning and increased well-being in clients. Fredrickson and Losada (2005) found the optimal ratio of positive to negative emotions to predict human flourishing to be 3:1. When they compared positive psychology interventions with counseling as usual with depressed clients, Seligman et al. (2005) found that those clients who received positive psychology interventions (as described later in this paper) showed greater improvement in mood and in overall well-being. Frederickson and colleagues (Garland et al., 2010) integrated the broaden-and-build model with advances in understanding the neuropsychological basis of emotion and described how positive psychology interventions helped to generate positive emotions that offset the effects of negative emotions in clients with disorders of affect regulation. We now turn our attention to a closer examination of ways in which a positive psychology perspective can enhance current approaches to counseling and then to the application of positive psychology to working with college students.

### **Augmenting Counseling with Positive Psychology**

Positive psychology does not seek to replace existing approaches to counseling, nor does it negate the need for interventions that are currently in place and directed toward addressing client concerns. Rather, it attempts to shift the focus to a more balanced view of strengths and deficits. As stated previously, positive psychology focuses more on what is right with us. This more equally balanced perspective is represented well by the four-front approach described by Wright and Lopez (2003). According to this approach, counselors include an assessment of both personal and environmental strengths and deficits. Instead of focusing solely on what is wrong, this approach helps both counselor and client to more fully appreciate personal strengths and environmental resources from the beginning of their relationship and to build on those assets over the course of counseling (Magyar-Moe, 2009). The four-front approach to assessment is useful because it can lead to a better understanding of client functioning and contextual influences. It can also help to determine how a client is functioning in view of the Complete State Model of Mental Health developed by Keyes and Lopez (2002). According to this model, clients are assessed on two continua from high to low: degree of symptoms of mental illness and of symptoms of well-being. This 2 x 2 model allows both counselor and client to determine in which of four quadrants the client falls: a) flourishing (low mental illness symptoms and high well-being symptoms); b) floundering (high mental illness symptoms and low well-being symptoms); c) languishing (low mental illness symptoms and low well-being symptoms); d) struggling (high mental illness symptoms and high well-being symptoms). A client's progress can

be monitored in view of the model, with the hope of movement towards greater well-being and reduced negative symptoms.

A positive psychology perspective can be integrated into any counseling approach to help clients achieve “life above zero” (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2009, p. 9), a life in which clients enjoy a greater sense of well-being, in addition to fewer negative symptoms. Frank and Frank (1991) suggest that different counseling approaches generally share the following elements: a) an engaging therapeutic relationship, b) a shared worldview, c) raising the client’s hope and expectations for improvement, and d) choosing interventions with the client that both counselor and client think will be effective. A counseling approach guided by positive psychology can enhance each of these areas by focusing on personal and situational strengths and utilizing positive psychology interventions. Looking at the first element, an engaging therapeutic relationship, taking a strengths-based approach can help the counselor facilitate a strong alliance by helping clients to identify and use their strengths and competencies to confront their struggles (Magyar-Moe, 2009). The second common element, a shared worldview, can be considered through the lens of positive psychology by acknowledging positive attributes that contribute to client strengths. The client may struggle with embracing this worldview at first, especially if they believe they have no strengths, but with the guidance of the counselor, the client’s perspective can evolve to a more positive worldview. The third element, hope, is crucial to effective counseling and has received considerable attention from a positive psychology perspective (Lopez et al., 2004). The goal then would be to transition to the fourth element, choosing interventions, by helping

clients discover ways in which they can use their strengths to overcome difficulties and move towards psychological flourishing.

### **Positive Psychology with College Students**

Unhealthy coping skills, depression, suicidal ideation, unhealthy adjustment to new environments, failing out of college, eating disorders, and aggression are just some of the issues that are seen in college counseling centers. College students desire everything to be right in their life and wish to perform at an optimal level. Positive psychology works well with college students because in this developmental stage, known as emerging adulthood, students are constantly trying new things and are still exploring their identity. Most of their physical and security needs are met on a consistent basis, so pursuing happiness and fulfillment are important to the student. Through the pursuit of finding out “Who am I?” college students question their values, purpose, worth, and what makes them happy, all of which are key pieces of positive psychology. This pursuit, when examined with students from a positive psychology perspective, can facilitate identity formation and increase self-efficacy (belief in one’s ability to complete tasks and reach goals), which can lead to increased self-regulation, greater intrinsic motivation, increased well-being, and more successful outcomes in different areas of college life (Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011).

We now turn our attention to five positive psychology perspectives that we have found useful in addressing common concerns of college students seen at our counseling center: strengths assessment, forgiveness, gratitude, flow, and resilience.

### **Strengths Assessment**

Adjusting to college life can be challenging even in the most supportive of circumstances. A person's sense of competency is affected by personal circumstances, and as a student journeys through college they can feel incompetent or unskilled to tackle problems. Oftentimes, what drives a client into counseling is an overwhelming sense of ineffectiveness. Students feel that "nothing seems to work" and perceive themselves as unable to bring to bear any personal strengths to help bring about desired changes. Discovering their virtues and strengths, as presented by the VIA, can help with these issues by encouraging students to pursue healthier coping skills through using their own positive qualities. Focusing on student virtues and strengths can lead to improvement in academic success, enhanced leadership, altruism, kindness, and gratification delay, all of which can help a college student to be less stressed in school and to improve their overall well-being (Logan, Kilmer, & Marlatt, 2010). The goal of the counselor in focusing on positive assets is to help students develop a sense of proficiency and confidence to approach problems. Moreover, highlighting the competencies of students utilizing positive psychology exercises can help remind the student of what skills they already have but may have forgotten or are not utilizing to their advantage. A positive psychology intervention that can help students to integrate their strengths into daily living involves helping them to identify their signature strengths (top five strengths based on VIA results) and then take one their strengths and use the strength in a new way every day for the following week. For example, if one of their signature strengths is kindness, they identify new ways in which they could demonstrate kindness (e.g., perform an anonymous favor for a friend or family member).

**Forgiveness**

College students frequently go to their college counseling center wanting to move forward from negative experiences in their past. Forgiveness can be an essential component of counseling when working with these students. When a person is stuck in a position of unforgiveness from being hurt, offended, wronged, cheated, or violated, he or she may experience persistent feelings and states such as anger, stress, hostility, hopelessness, depression, shame, and hatred (Harris et al., 2007). Forgiveness can allow students to reduce any unhealthy physiological arousal, and/or chronic negative thoughts, feelings, and actions that may occur when thinking of the experience. Moreover, forgiveness allows individuals to achieve a more positive emotional state and to experience compassion and empathy (Harris et al., 2007). Students need to understand the impact that staying in a state of unforgiveness can have on their lives, so that they can continue to work in a positive direction towards a state of forgiveness. As a component of an overall counseling approach to working on forgiveness, one intervention that can help students to achieve forgiveness involves writing a forgiveness letter to the offender, which is not sent but is discussed with the counselor. When addressing forgiveness from a positive psychology perspective, the counselor can then use the letter to help the student to consider the potential benefits of forgiveness and how they might use their signature strengths to help move towards forgiveness.

**Gratitude**

Gratitude is a topic that has received considerable attention from researchers and practitioners interested in positive psychology. Magyar-Moe (2009) defines gratefulness

“as a willingness to recognize that one has received a valuable positive outcome from another individual’s kindness” (p. 103). Nelson (2009) points out that gratitude can improve well-being in two ways: directly, as a causal agent of well-being; and indirectly, as a means of buffering against negative states and emotions. The feeling of gratitude is both beneficial to the giver and receiver in that it produces a sense of appreciation and a positive view of the self. Emmons (2007) states that being grateful “is an acknowledgment that there are good and enjoyable things in the world” (p.5), which some students struggle to remember. Nelson (2009) points out that those individuals with a strong grateful disposition have been found to exhibit three characteristics: a sense of abundance, an appreciation of the contributions of others, and an appreciation of small pleasures. Gratitude has been closely associated with empathy and conceived as one of the empathic emotions. Nelson (2009) also associates gratitude with Fredrickson’s broaden and build model of positive emotion, explaining how gratitude, like other positive emotions, can “undo the adverse physiological effects of negative emotions, and extend cognitive functioning through more creative, flexible or efficient patterns of thinking” (p. 39).

College students frequently endure stressful and sometimes even traumatic experiences. Utilizing gratitude to change how college students view their experiences could help them to appreciate the importance of each situation and its potential to enhance levels of resilience, self-efficacy, and hope (Snyder et al., 2011). Specifically, the counselor could use two positive psychology exercises: a gratitude journal and a gratitude letter. Keeping a gratitude journal involves writing down three things that the student is grateful for each day, reflecting on areas of gratitude, and discussing the

experience of keeping the journal with their counselor. It is helpful to have them do this every day for the first week but then to reduce the frequency so that their blessings are more meaningful to them (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). A gratitude letter is simply a letter in which the student is asked to write a letter to someone who has been kind to them and to describe in concrete and specific terms why they are grateful. If possible, it is recommended that the student hand delivers the letter and takes time with the individual when they read it. Both interventions have been found to lead to improved mood and enhanced well-being (Magyar-Moe, 2009; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

### **Flow**

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) describes flow as a process of deep absorption in an activity. He associates flow with increased positive affect and decreased negative affect and explains how flow is possible when we engage in interesting activities that match or challenge our level of skill. Flow is simple to learn and implement, which is advantageous for busy college students. It allows students to achieve a state of relaxation while still being productive. Rogatko (2009) found that, for college students, the most common high flow activity was exercise, while the most common low flow activities were going to class and studying. Students tend to be overly stressed when working on anything specifically related to schoolwork. To reduce stress, it is important to encourage students to find where they are at their highest points of flow (e.g., running, painting, social interactions) and to engage in those activities at least once a week. Being in a state of flow allows students to experience less stress and to enjoy more success in the classroom because of improved focus. Flow also can help with adjustment issues

associated with being away at college by allowing students to engage in a flow activity that reminds them of their home environment. Rogatko (2009) emphasizes that flow is influenced not only by the activity but also by personal characteristics of the individual engaged in the activity. As a result, flow activities vary from one person to the next; counselors can help students determine which flow activities work best for them. When used in counseling, students can be asked to reflect on their flow experiences and discuss them with their counselor, which can lead to increased self-efficacy.

### **Resilience**

Resilience refers to one's ability to "bounce back." According to Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, and Reed (2009), resilience occurs when one is able to adapt effectively to a significant challenge or risk. College students face challenges of many kinds: important decisions regarding life, future, relationships, and identity; self-esteem; academic demands; and personal crises. Life during college can be stressful, frustrating and overwhelming. Stress of any kind can contribute to negative thought processes and emotional problems, including depression and suicide. Resilience, a major construct in positive psychology, promotes well-being and serves as a protective factor for students when they face significant challenges (Mak, Ng, & Wong, 2011). According to Masten et al. (2009), protective factors for resilience include a) factors in the student (e.g., self-regulation, self-efficacy, optimism); b) factors in the family and close relationships (e.g., positive attachments, constructive parental involvement, relationships with prosocial and well-adjusted peers and partners); and c) factors in the community (ties to prosocial organizations, communities with high "collective efficacy," safe living conditions).

Masten (2001) refers to these protective factors as “ordinary magic” because they are ordinary characteristics that, when combined, lead to resilient adjustment.

In a college setting, resilience can be fostered during counseling sessions but also through prevention services that are provided outside of the counseling office. Mak et al. (2011) suggest that counselors can help students to strengthen protective factors as a part of their counseling approach but that efforts can also be made to equip all students with more effective coping skills through education across the curriculum. For example, workshops could be provided as a part of freshman orientation or a first-year experience course to strengthen personal protective factors. Colleges could also give attention to strengthening interpersonal and community protective factors through student life activities. As a part of counseling, students could be helped by their counselors to gain a better appreciation of how they are utilizing their signature strengths to promote resilience, which could lead to increased self-efficacy, optimism, and hope.

We now present a specific case in which a positive psychology perspective was integrated into the counseling approach taken with a college student. Through this example, we will demonstrate the usefulness of many of the ideas presented thus far in this paper.

### **The Case of Carol**

Carol is a twenty-one year old single white female, studying elementary education at a college about thirty minutes from her hometown. Her mother, a teacher, and her father, an insurance salesman, are still married and are raising her younger brother and sister. Carol’s mother has been diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder, while her younger sister has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Carol has a wonderful

relationship with her siblings and speaks with and visits them frequently. The relationship between Carol and her parents is at times chaotic due to enmeshment with her mother and a “business-like” relationship with her father. Carol has no history of drug or alcohol abuse; neither does anyone in her immediate family. She currently is on medication for mild anxiety and sees a psychiatrist once a month to monitor her symptoms and medication.

Carol was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa three years ago, when she went into inpatient treatment for three months. She has struggled with the eating disorder, including issues with body image, self-esteem, and eating habits, for six years, and she has been to several counselors. It has been more difficult for her to deal with these issues now that she is away from home and in college. When asked how she would describe her social relationships, Carol identified herself as an introvert who has trouble making friends. After the initial intake, Carol was referred to her family practitioner to ensure that any medical issues were addressed. She was diagnosed with anemia and low blood pressure and was prescribed medication for both diagnoses.

During the initial session, Carol stated that she had not experienced consistent and lasting positive results from any former treatment she had received; she hoped that getting counseling from a new individual would improve her symptoms. Carol was at an unhealthy weight and was eating only about seven hundred calories a day, along with exercising three to four hours a day. Anxiety, negative body image, low self-esteem, unhealthy eating habits, and post-traumatic symptoms were her presenting symptoms and concerns. Carol had unhealthy goals for weight loss and struggled with seeing any positive aspects of herself or of her life. Carol disclosed in later sessions that she had

been raped twice by a family friend and sexually molested by a soccer coach. She also had experienced the death of several close family members over the span of about seven years. These experiences caused her to feel out of control; controlling her eating was how she had learned to cope. Carol blamed herself for both the sexual trauma and for several of the deaths. She struggled with moving forward from these events and stated that she had a strong desire to work on reducing her constant negative thoughts about them.

The counselor talked with Carol about positive psychology approaches that could be beneficial. Carol was unsure if it would work, stating that it seemed “too simple” for her intense feelings and unhealthy behaviors, but she was willing to try anything because college was difficult enough; she wanted to reduce her stress.

The counselor started and ended every session discussing everything that was good and positive in Carol’s life, an approach consistent with that suggested by Steck, Abrams, and Phelps (2004). Carol indicated that she found this approach to be very helpful because it enabled her to develop a more optimistic perspective. Carol was able to learn about her strengths through the VIA inventory; by focusing on being intentional about utilizing her signature strengths, her overall self-esteem and self-efficacy improved. Carol was also able to see how resilient she was to have experienced several negative and traumatic issues in her life and to still be in college and focused on a career. Writing an autobiography to portray her resilience was so beneficial to Carol that she framed what she wrote; it is still hanging in her room to remind her of her resilience.

Focusing on gratitude helped Carol to increase positive affect and decrease negative thoughts. Keeping a gratitude journal helped Carol to focus on her blessings instead of dwelling on the past. Carol also wrote a letter of gratitude to the three people in

her life: a teacher, her sister, and a deceased aunt. Writing these letters seemed to bring about the greatest gains observed in Carol's progress. Writing the letter to her aunt helped Carol to bring closure to her grief of six years duration, the same amount time that she had struggled with her eating disorder. Carol also wrote a letter of forgiveness to herself and to the individuals who had raped and sexually molested her. The forgiveness letters to others were not sent but rather were processed with Carol's counselor. Writing the forgiveness letters provided a cathartic moment for Carol and helped her to place painful associated memories in the past and to focus on the present and future with increased hope and optimism.

Carol was so encouraged by her progress from taking these "simple steps" that she wanted to focus on using positive psychology as a way of life. Other approaches were used in her counseling, in addition to those associated with positive psychology, but Carol stated that implementing positive psychology techniques was the one thing that was different from previous counseling efforts. Carol is now engaging in a healthy, positive life and even enjoys eating through learning how to savor her food and by being intentional with her meals. Carol is eating a healthy amount and is no longer engaging in behaviors associated with eating disorder. Her self-esteem and body image have improved, and she is successful in college. Incorporating positive psychology into her life has helped this college student to flourish.

### **Conclusion**

In addition to integrating positive psychology approaches in their counseling with students, college counselors are in an advantageous position to influence student retention and other aspects of student well-being and success through their interactions with

colleagues, including professors, administrators and other staff members who work directly with students or otherwise make decisions that affect students' lives. Fostering the adoption of a strengths-based approach across the curriculum and in other aspects of students' lives could help students to gain a better understanding of their strengths and to build on them during their college experience (Shushok & Hulme, 2006). Some colleges are taking a systematic approach to incorporating strengths building into their students' experience by using the StrengthsQuest Program developed by Clifton at the Gallup Organization (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Clifton & Anderson, 2002). Students complete an online version of the Clifton StrengthsFinder, an instrument similar to the VIA, that provides information on 35 strengths areas referred to as themes. Students are then helped to work on their strengths and exercise them in their studies and in other aspects of their college experience. Unlike the VIA, there is a cost involved in using the Clifton StrengthsFinder. Research is still being done to examine the links between positive psychology practices and retention of college students. Bean & Eaton (2001) point out that when students feel positively about the institution they are attending, feel that they fit in, and that they have the ability to achieve academic success, they are more likely to succeed and graduate, because they feel loyalty to the school.

A discussion of the contributions of positive psychology to counseling college students would not be complete without considering how the life of the counselor can be impacted by practicing positive psychology in daily living. The same positive psychology exercises described in this paper for use in counseling situations can also be used by counselors for their own personal well-being. We have found that practicing these exercises on a personal level helps counselors to have a better understanding of their

effects and potential uses before recommending them to clients. Use of these positive psychology exercises by counselors also represents a type of self-care that can help counselors to experience enhanced well-being in their personal lives and contribute to maintaining effectiveness as a counselor.

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