Positive Psychology – Its need in Indian Youth

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Abstract

More than a decade has passed since American Psychologist devoted its millennial issue to the emerging science of Positive Psychology: the study of positive 3. emotion, positive character and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive 4. Psychologists don’t claim to have invented the good life or to have ushered in its scientific study, but the value of the overarching term “positive psychology” lies in its uniting of what has been scattered and disparate lines of theory and research about what makes life worth living (Peterson & Park, 2003).

In the present article, we review the development of positive psychology and the role it can play in making a better life for us in today’s context. In context to India, how unknowingly, a small number of the Indian Youth seem to have become aware of the basic constructs propounded by the researchers of Positive Psychology and are adopting it to attain a more fulfilling life. So, if taught and trained from the primary level, what wonders can India’s next generation achieve for itself by revolutionizing the political, social and spiritual spheres and create a more fulfilling, and happy personal and professional life?

Key words- Positive Psychology, Youth in India, Happiness, Optimism, Hope, Resilience

Introduction-

Positive Psychology is a rapidly growing branch of psychology that studies well being. It’s not a very new term in the area of research anymore as since its inception in 1997, a lot of researchers are working in this area and revolutionizing people’s lives.

Psychologist, noted author, and former president of the American Psychological Society, Dr. Martin Seligman, ignited the psychology community in 1997 by identifying the need to focus research on positive aspects of human life, although the term originates with Maslow, in his 1954 book Motivation and Personality.

The result is Positive Psychology, the study of the factors contributing to well being and happiness. Positive psychologists seek "to find and nurture genius and talent", and "to make normal life more fulfilling" not simply to treat mental illness. Seligman believes that "The time has finally arrived for a science that seeks to understand positive emotion, build strength and virtue, and provide guideposts for finding what Aristotle called the 'good life'" (Seligman, 2002). He lists four long term aims of positive psychology (Seligman, 2003) as:

1. "Fostering better prevention by buffering"
2. "Supplementing the available techniques for therapy by training practitioners to identify and build strengths explicitly and systematically"
3. Curtailing "the promiscuous victimology that pervades the social sciences"
4. "Moving psychology from the egocentric to the philanthropic"

Need of Positive Psychology in today's context

The doors of emotion are slammed shut upon entering into the realm of judgment. Judgment paralyzes emotion. Do not seek to judge. Rather, feel the emotion, allow it to pass through you, understand and master the feelings.

Then use the power of your emotion to spur you on to right action.

- Dr. John Schinnerer

We often wonder, on the capacity of some people to be remarkably happy, cool and composed even in the face of adversity or hard times. It is striking. We can all identify individuals who appear to have a talent for happiness, to see the world around them through rose coloured glasses, to make out the silver lining even in misfortune, to live in the present and to find joy in the little things from day to day (Freedman, 1978; Myers & Diener, 1995; Ryff, Singer, Love & Essex, 1998; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Similarly, we are familiar with people, who, even in the best of times, seem chronically unhappy, peering at the world, through grey coloured spectacles (M.M. Eysenck, 1990), always complaining, accentuating the negative, dwelling on the downside of both the trivial and the sublime (Lyubomirsky, Kasri, & Zehm, 2000). These people generally derive little pleasures from life (Myers & Diener, 1995). Thus anecdotal evidence and everyday experiences alike suggest that one of the most salient and a significant dimension of human experience and emotional life is happiness. Happiness is the base for human well being.

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 of happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skills, 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.
The 'secret of happiness' is a principle searched for and understood by the greatest minds in history. Philosophers and saints have searched for the true happiness in human life, bringing contentment and peace. We humans have always searched for happiness and contentment outside of our own self. Most people don’t understand the relationship between their thoughts and feelings. They have failed to understand their own emotions and how it influences their thoughts and behaviours.

The Buddha said, “We are shaped by our thoughts; we become what we think. When the mind is pure, joy follows like a shadow that never leaves. If a man’s mind becomes pure, his surroundings will also become pure.”

And from the Bible we get “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he.”

Does anger spring from nowhere? No we must first have a thought or image in our mind and those thoughts create the feeling of anger.

Henry David Thoreau knew that, “Thought is the sculptor who can create the person you want to be.”

And the point is not to try and think our way to happiness. The point is to understand that thoughts are just thoughts and create feelings.

Happiness is already within us. Just realize that thought is the link. We can have thoughts that make us happy, but these thoughts will come and go.

Ralph Waldo Emerson knew that, “The revelation of thought takes men out of servitude into freedom.”

Once we understand the relationship between thought and feeling just having the understanding can liberate us from depression. The absence of negative thoughts creates a natural happiness and contentment within. The key is to not let thoughts themselves become props for being happy. Let the natural happiness within rise from the absence and understanding that thoughts are just thoughts.

In order to answer whether happiness is something which can be taught, research on the effectiveness of psychological interventions has been done. First of all, it is important to mention that Seligman proposed “happiness formula” which is: \[ H = S + C + V \] (Seligman, 2002), where “H” is “enduring level of happiness”, “S” is ones set point meaning ones general level of happiness presumably biologically determined, “C” is the circumstances of one’s life and finally “V” is things individuals have voluntary control on. The last factor is the most important one for positive psychology in context of increasing control that people have. The sooner we gain an understanding that we can voluntarily control and bring changes in our day to day circumstances by deciding how we would react to it, easier it would be for us to be at peace with ourselves and find happiness.

The answer to all of these questions is, of course, “maybe.”

According to Lyubomirsky, et al, while half of our happiness may be the result of a genetic set point and 10% probably comes from our life circumstances, 40% is likely the result of our choices.

The main point or the bottom line? Make good choices now that improve your well-being. It’s not such a leap to say that well-being improves your health. But Positive Psychology can make \( 1 + 1 = 3 \). That’s a win-win-win: more well-being, better health, and…a longer life.

We human beings are in search of satisfaction and fulfillment in both our personal as well as professional life. In a nut shell we all want to be happy. Happiness which seems to be farfetched in today’s competitive, poverty stricken and fast paced world. A world where crime rates seem to be on a high automatically brings happiness quotient low for people. But still we find people who never give up, in spite of all the hardships they have ever faced they always want to bring a smile on other people’s face. It’s because of their ability to keep the negative thoughts at bay. These people show all the symptoms of believing in the domains of Positive Psychology, having resilience, are high on hope and optimism, positive emotions etc.

With over 60% of its population under the age of thirty, India is growing younger whereas most developed countries are facing an ageing population. Rough estimates peg the size of the Indian youth segment (between the age of fifteen and twenty five) at around 250mn people. Further, about six out of ten households in India have at least one liberalization child (born and grown during the liberalization of the Indian economy) who acts as a change agent in that household. Indian youth are, however, not a homogenous group. On the contrary, they comprise three broad categories:

1. **The bharatiyas**: accounting for around 67% of the population, the bharatiyas live in rural areas. They are least influenced by globalization and have high traditional values.
They are also the least economically privileged, most family oriented and Bollywood influenced generation.

2. **The Indians**: constituting around 31.5% of the population, the Indians are moderately influenced by globalization. Though well aware of global trends, this segment is firmly rooted in Indian family values, customs and ethos.

3. **The inglodians**: this segment is the creamy layer, accounting for just 1.5% (or roughly three million) of India’s youth market. However this segment is expanding quickly with a growth rate of over 70%. A highly important consumer group, the segment has the following characteristics: affluent, consuming most of the trendy and luxury items, Internet savvy and believers of the global village concept, highly influenced by western music, food, fashion and culture. Indian at heart, they may not have grown up in the creamy layer but have risen to the strata through various professional and academic achievements.

Remember, the golden rule - India’s youth should not be painted with the same colors as their global counterparts, as stated in the theory of adopted differentiation. In a study of youth trends undertaken in six A1 and three A2 cities in India over the course of 4.5 years, it was found that there may be one underlying explanation for the “we are different” behavioral patterns and choices of youth in India – “the theory of ‘adopted differentiation’.

The theory states: “to distinguish and separate themselves from the mass culture of India and other youth categories, the Inglodians and most of the Indians have consciously adopted a sophisticated, yet cool look and attitude that is not as young as the global perception of youth culture”. These youth not only want to stand out in the way they carry themselves but also with their work. They are optimistic, hopeful, more determined, showing all the aspects of being under the influence of Positive Psychology.

In India, youths today seem to be more dynamic and ambitious. They want to conquer the whole world and they have their family, cultural support and motivation to try to attain the same. A few of them are also breaking the traditional norms and beliefs, breaking the usual mold of getting a secure job and aiming to make a difference to the society. Professionally also, young people today are in search of that elusive ‘something’, a job or role that can fire their passion. To quote an example; Twenty one-year-old Saurabh is on a mission. Bharat Uday Mission. The only goal of Bharat Uday Mission — or BM, as it is called — is to wipe every tear from every eye as far as possible, first in India and, if possible, in the whole world, through an ideal combination of spiritual, social, economic and political means.

BM originated at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kanpur in October 2004. The idea is simple. ‘Gain the confidence of the masses through social work’. And in a few years time, form a political party with a difference. A party that will ensure that by 2030, all Indians breathe in a socially, economically and spiritually developed country.

It sounds extremely idealistic, but speak to a BM member like Saurabh, a senior member of the Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh (India) chapter, and you soon realize that these guys really believe in their dream. Well, at least some of them do. “BM has over 5,000 members in 55 cities,” says Saurabh, “but it is the 200-250 members of around 10 chapters who do the ground-level work.” The movement is fully decentralized and each chapter takes up the causes it wants to. For instance, the Gwalior chapter is on a ‘Mission Shiksha’ to improve government schools. “We have visited 12 schools and compiled a database. We are also motivating children who work as laborers to join schools,” says Saurabh. Also, the BM activists plan to file over 500 petitions under the Right to Information Act to pin down the government on issues like absent teachers and the lack of basic infrastructure.

The interesting thing about BM is that it originated at an IIT, an institution whose students are usually associated with ‘taking’ and not giving back to society. And its active members — from IIT and other institutions — are all extremely employable, especially in the current, post-recession, booming job market. But even as the four-lane highway beckons, they are choosing to take the dirt path to their dream. They are positive and persistent in their belief, hopeful to fulfill their dreams in attaining a spiritually, socially and politically developed India.

Even, at the Indian Institutes of Management over the past few years, among those students with record-breaking salaries that were splashed all over the media, there is developing a breed of students do not take a placement. Most of them are either pursuing their dream of becoming entrepreneurs or finding their own path in search of joy and fulfillment, in polite company, be referred to as ‘goofball dreams’. IIM Ahmadabad’s Mansur Nazimuddin gave up a pre-placement offer with a leading investment bank and intends to make his mark in the gaming industry. There are many others like him. IIM Lucknow Satajjit Sadananda plans to set up a football club while IIM Ahmadabad graduate Gaurav Dagaonkar is currently recording his first music album. Yet, no one is calling them ‘mad’. Because the new, cool thing to do is to make money by living life the way you want to. So, it’s good for you if you have the talent.

And though the numbers are extremely small, their very existence is indicative of a new breed of individuals, a breed of the ‘passionates’. The fact that they can easily get an entry-level job that pays Rs 4 lacs or Rs 6 lacs or even Rs 10 lacs per annum is no big deal to them. They don’t want a job. They want to find their calling in life.

These young people are also looking for that elusive something called ‘meaning’, a job or a role that ignites their passion. The ACNielsen-ORG Marg Campus Recruiters’ Index (2005) reported that 64 per cent of engineering graduates who join tech companies intend to leave within the first two years or less, as they are in search of a more meaningful life.
The general feeling is that ‘work in a software company is quite mundane and does not involve too many programming skills.’ Here’s how one IT professional summed it up on a popular student forum: “Remember (the Indian) software industry is not about creating new things. It is all about client giving you work. Work that their IT team is not interested in doing... But you get money and, of course, work experience and a life called ‘white collar job’.”

So, while the software industry may be making record profits, it is not firing the imagination of the youth who work in it. Swanky cafeterias and big bonuses work for a while. But today’s youth want all that, and more. They want to be a part of something larger than themselves. They want to be anointed not just as consumers, but as contributors to society.

A global survey by Swedish research and consulting firm Kairos Future reconfirms the findings that “work comes as top priority for Indian youth, followed by a good career and higher status. In contrast, European youth chose a good living environment above all work related aspects.” The priorities of Indian youth - work, good career and a position with high status - are reflected in their values such as endurance and entrepreneurship. Mats Lindgren, CEO and founder of Kairos Future Group, says that, “The Indian youth are also strikingly more optimistic about their future and also about the future of society. The general picture in other countries is that young people tend to be personal optimists but societal pessimists.”

Research has demonstrated that it is possible to be happier — to feel more satisfied, to be more engaged with life, find more meaning, have higher hopes, and probably even laugh and smile more, regardless of one’s circumstances. Positive psychology interventions can also lastingly decrease depression symptoms. Having accepted the success in research, people are adopting it in their real life too, striving to attain a more meaningful life.

Positive Psychology while realizing people as meaning-seeking and meaning-making creatures, living in a world of personal and cultural meanings; recognizes that people have the predisposition to strive for personal significance, growth, and happiness given the reality of the impermanence of life. They strive for balancing self-actualization with the need for community and spiritual union; viewing existential anxieties as the necessary preconditions for the development of virtues such as altruism, courage, creativity, resilience, love, and optimism. It advocates an integrative approach towards various schools of existential and meaning-oriented psychotherapies; fostering the integration of scientific psychology and spirituality in the practice of counseling and psychology; stressing the discovery of meaning and purpose of both specific situations and life as a whole.

Therefore, today youth in India is “identifying and nurturing their strongest qualities, what they do best and finding the best ways to live out their lives positively and happily”, hence promoting Positive Psychology too. They are unknowingly adapting and developing all the aspects of Positive Psychology, its dimensions of hope, optimism, resilience and self-efficacy.

They are high on optimism, strive to be high achievers and have better overall health. Optimistic people believe bad events to be more temporary than permanent and bounce back quickly from failure, thereby being resilient, whereas others may take longer periods to recover or may never recover. Thus they are high on hope too. Hope is a learned style of goal-directed thinking in which the person utilizes both pathways thinking (the perceived capacity to find routes to desired goals) and agency thinking (the requisite motivations to use those routes). While developing self-efficacy, they strengthen “one’s belief in one’s ability to accomplish a task by one’s own efforts”. High self-efficacy can help one overcome abuse, overcome eating disorders, and maintain a healthy lifestyle. High self-efficacy also improves the immune system, aids in stress management, and decreases pain, thereby enhancing Personal Effectiveness.

Adopting and implementing Positive psychology is beneficial in all spheres. Even at the level of schools and students, it can encourage individuals to strive to do the best they can whereas scolding has the opposite effect. Ignoring or criticizing students can hinder their education. Positive emotions enable individuals to learn and work to the best of their ability.

As researchers (Clifton and Rath) believe that ‘positive emotions are an essential daily requirement for survival.’ Hence Positive Psychology being taught from the initial stages of life to a child helps us develop them into more optimistic and self reliant individuals, striving to attain their dreams. As Marianne Williamson said: “Our deepest fear is NOT that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of god that is within us. It is not just in some of us. It is in everyone. As we let our own light shine we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear our presence automatically liberates others”.

REFERENCES-

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positive_psychology


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