

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

The Philosophy Behind the “What Works” Approach

Here at Susan LaFreniere & Associates our practice is one of seeking new directions, behaviors and options toward effective living. We proceed with a “What Works” or solution-focused approach moving from identifying problems and pain to potential solutions as soon as adequate emotional validation and understanding is attained. The attitude here is positive and non-judgmental. This Positive Psychological approach is integral—encompassing individual, family and group counseling as well as adventure based activities.

Humans seek to increase positive experience. Even in the midst of conflict, knowing what we don’t want moves us toward what we do want. The intention is to go beyond alleviating pain toward the development of new skills, thought patterns and behaviors. These changes in skill, thought and behavior help create the absolute best quality of life given one’s particular situation, life experience and available resources.

The Positive Psychology movement is expanding and providing scientific research to validate its theory and approach to psychology. Universities such as the University of Michigan, University of Pennsylvania and the University of North Carolina are continuing studies focused in the Positive Psychological approach to human behavior and change processes. Positive Psychology is a field of inquiry that focuses on what is good, pleasurable and right in the human experience. It believes that the traditional focus of psychology has been limited to understanding a mental/psychological illness with the goal being one of decreasing that individual’s suffering. Little energy has been spent on accumulating knowledge on what contributes to an enjoyable, pleasurable and healthy human experience. The study of highly functioning, productive, fulfilled human beings has been largely ignored by contemporary psychology. And yet, isn’t searching for happiness—trying to live ‘the good life’—as much a part of human existence as preventing or recovering from mental illness and social/relational deficiencies?

Here at Susan LaFreniere & Associates, we go beyond cognitive behavioral therapies that are currently used to treat anxiety, depression and other disorders and further instill skills for joyful, contented living. Current Cognitive Behavioral Theory focuses on reducing /alleviating negative thoughts that lead to intense feelings of sadness and anxiety, suggesting that if one is able to reframe thinking, then dysfunctional behavior and symptoms will reduce. With this in mind, we seek to contest negative patterning and move toward “what works.” Further, we work to instill new skills, activities and attitudes that actually take one beyond “neutral” to create joy, gratification and contentment, along with physical health. The goal is to move beyond problems and solutions and toward happiness and life satisfaction in general. Thus, a positive psychological approach toward ‘What Works!’

Positive Living

Let’s look at the HEART of the matter. People experience feelings, have emotions and are in “moods.” What are they exactly?

Feelings: sad, mad, glad, hurt, ashamed, afraid, etc.

Emotions are more complex than feelings in that they encompass physiologic arousal as well characteristic thoughts and actions. Emotions can be described as either positive or negative. Positive emotions such as joy, interest, love and contentment function differently from negative emotions. Rather than signal danger, they signal safety. By doing so, they expand our thinking and behaving response options, allowing us to develop strengths and resources we can draw upon in the future. In fact, evidence shows that positive emotions induced in the laboratory are associated with greater attention span, working memory, enhanced verbal fluency and greater openness to information. Psychologist Barbara Frederickson calls this “**The Broaden and Build Theory.**” The initiation of positive emotions was also found to undo anxiety that had been induced in research subjects.

Mood then is a generalized feeling or emotional experience. Moods are more general than emotions and less likely to be linked to a specific experience. They are also more likely to be off the radar of consciousness and last longer than emotions, thus serving as the emotional lens through which we view all of our other experiences.

Psychologists have named the ability to experience a generalized positive feeling or emotion **positive affectivity**. The degree to which someone experiences positive emotions describes whether they exhibit positive or negative affectivity. People vary in their level of absolute affectivity: the level of their mood, be it good or bad by description. Put another way, some people feel a similar level of good mood most of the time, and others have wider mood swings, even within the positive range. Research shows that people who are high in positive affectivity are socially more active, have more friends and acquaintances and have greater involvement in social organizations than those low in positive affectivity. People high in positive affectivity are more likely to be happy/hopeful in their relationships and pleased with their jobs. Note: positive mood is, at least in part, genetically transmitted, but it does not mean that positive mood cannot be increased by positive action and experience. Therefore, if we wish to increase our positive mood state we must focus more on our actions than our thoughts. Working towards a goal achieves a mood shift along with achieving a goal. It is important that we try new things, take positive action based on facts, and trust that right feelings will eventually follow.

Another contribution to general positive life includes experiences of “flow.” **Flow** is a state of complete absorption in an activity in the moment. The absorption is so complete that an individual in the state of “flow” is unaware of the passage of time or of his own mental banter or “self-talk.” The state of flow itself, then, is associated with the absence of emotion either positive or negative in the moment. The recollection of the experience, however, is usually quite positive when one remembers being completely caught up in the activity—thoroughly absorbed and unaware of either inner feelings, sensations, or other distractions. Situations in which flow is experienced can be either socially or individually created: enjoying a good conversation, making music with a group of people, playing a team sport, painting, writing, a hobby, good book, gardening—you name it! It is more likely to occur when an individual is engaged in a voluntary activity and it appears to depend on the right combination of the challenge posed by the activity and the skill level of the person. Despite the positive mood enhancing effect of the flow experience, most of us engage only infrequently in activities capable of producing flow. It would serve us to find and/or increase our flow activity. There’s nothing wrong with “chilling out” with technology and TV once in a while. However, these activities lack the challenge component of flow and cannot produce the depth of satisfaction that a flow experience provides.

Let us now look at the notion of **savoring**. Savoring is a term that refers to the awareness of a pleasurable state and the deliberate effort to make it last. It includes highlighting what’s right and focusing on the attractiveness

and splendor of things be it audial, visual, olfactory or kinesthetic. This form of “relishing” can apply to a person, place or thing, or to an experience, idea or dream.

While we are on the subject of positive experience, let’s also consider what it means to be happy. Three things contribute to a general experience of happiness.

1. A person’s set point or characteristic level of happiness (which is partially inherited).
2. A person’s life circumstance in relation to volitional activity or ‘ability to choose.’
3. Optimism, an attitude in conjunction with good spirits, perseverance, and problem solving ability.

Volitional activities are those we have control over that can change our day-to-day level of happiness. We can make new friends and spend more time with them. We can find a job that suites us and provides satisfaction. We can practice a religion or spiritual focus, improve our health and fitness and add more pleasure or experiences to our daily lives. Additionally, the happiest people are those with strong interpersonal relationships. So, increasing happiness includes improving interpersonal skills. In order to be most happy, one should highlight what is right, make choices about activities that will increase pleasure and use good communication and positive conflict resolution with others. Practice these (enjoyable) challenges and watch your happiness climb!

Optimism is yet another crucial concept in positive psychology. You can think of optimism as seeing the “sunny side” of a situation or self attribute, emphasizing the positive aspects, potential, meanings or possible outcomes of any given experience. Positive psychologists have two main ways of formally defining optimism. Dr. Chris Peterson, a leading researcher in positive psychology, defines optimism as a positive “attributional style” or a positive way of determining the possible cause for an event in one’s life. Optimists see causes for negative events as external (resulting from an outside force, not “my fault”), unstable (things will change, it won’t be this way forever, “this too will pass”), and specific (it influences only one area of life, i.e.): bad events at work only relate to work, not to home life). Other psychologists focus on what is known as **dispositional optimism**: the belief that good events will be plentiful in the future, and bad events will be rare. Remember, optimism has clear benefits and pessimism has a clear downside. Optimists have a higher life expectancy, see problems in life as challenges instead of ways of being defeated, are happier, healthier and are more open minded and accepting. Work to see the glass half full and don’t focus on the half empty. It will take conscious practice.

And finally, positive psychology focuses on an individual’s strengths and values. Through extensive research over many years, Dr. Chris Peterson has identified 24 of these character strengths, all of which fall into 6 virtue categories. Strength categories include:

- wisdom and knowledge
- courage
- humanity (kindness, love, etc.)
- justness (fairness, leadership, etc.)
- temperance (self-regulation, forgiveness)

transcendence (spirituality, appreciation of beauty)

There is cross-cultural similarity in the value placed on the 24 character strengths noted above: all human groups display most of these. However, the most highly valued strengths tend to be kindness, fairness, authenticity, gratitude and open-mindedness.

In conclusion, Positive Psychology is a new field of scientific endeavor dedicated to exploring the positive ends of the mental health spectrum. Although many interventions have taken on this brighter lens, it has not been adequately studied or integrated into the treatment process. The psychological 'good life' can be enhanced by specific and deliberate learning and behavior. This is why, at Susan LaFreniere and Associates, we will move you towards wellness programs on self-relationship and self-care along with the skills you may need to interact positively with the world and others. We hope to strengthen your positive life skills along with alleviating problems and pain. With a little support, education, and encouragement, one's resilience improves adaption to stress, the experience of thriving despite adversity, the practice of a flexible approach to living and the degree to which one revels in positive self and relationships!