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Positive Psychology and Youth Development: A New Science for a Time-Honored Extension Mission

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Positive Psychology and Youth Development: A New Science for a Time-Honored Extension Mission

Abstract

Extension professionals can play a significant role in building positive psychology in youth programs. The psychology research clearly demonstrates the significant impact of positive psychology. In addition to subject matter related to 4-H and Youth Development, Extension professionals can utilize positive psychology best practices to enhance human capacity, ultimately leading to a greater quality of life. This article explains the three pillars of positive psychology and provides tools that can be used with youth to enhance their 4-H experience. These simple, creative tools do not take a great deal of time to implement, but the impact could be life long.

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In 1998, the new president of the American Psychological Association (APA), Dr. Martin Seligman, having taken stock of the field of psychology, declared in his inaugural presidential address to the profession that, "Psychology is not just the study of weakness and damage, it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best within ourselves" (Seligman, 1998, p.1). Seligman named this new field of psychology "positive psychology." Since then it has attracted the attention of a growing corps of researchers and practitioners.

This article introduces the new science of positive psychology to Extension professionals and explains how its principles can be applied to youth development. Integrating simple, positive psychology strategies into our youth development programs will help our audiences gain new and fresh insight about themselves and provide them with a new set of life-skills that will empower them. The three fundamental principles or pillars of this new science are discussed below.

Pillar 1--Every Person Has a Unique Set of Talents, Abilities, and Assets

The first pillar recognizes that every person has a unique set of talents, abilities, and psychological assets that can be measured and enhanced. Furthermore, developing one's constructive human capacities builds positive psychological capital, which then can be drawn upon as a buffer against normal psychological and physical distress. Focusing personal time and energy on building a life around one's strengths can lead to a more productive and fulfilled life. One way to demonstrate this strengths-based perspective to youth is the **Right Hand/Left Hand Exercise**.

This exercise asks youth to hold up their right hand if they are right-handed and then sign their name 10 times on a sheet of paper. Those who are left-handed are asked to perform the same

task. Once this step is completed, the task changes, requiring them to write their name 10 times with their opposite hand.

Youth typically get very frustrated with this. You then ask them to describe what it felt like to try to write with their weak hand. Next, you ask them whether they think that they could ever duplicate their original signature if they diligently practiced with their weak hand. Some will say "yes," but they will acknowledge the difficulty of the task. And some will recognize that their success in trying to improve their weak hand's ability to easily reproduce their signature will be limited. They will never be able to be as good with their weak hand as they are with their strong hand. The point is that all of us have strengths and that it is far easier and more effective to play to one's strengths.

Pillar 2--The Broaden-and-Build Principle

The second pillar, the Broaden-and-Build Principle, holds that positive emotions produce adaptive thinking processes and behaviors (Fredrickson, 2003). Two decades of experiments by Alice Isen have shown that when people have a positive frame of mind, their thinking becomes more creative, integrative, and flexible (Isen, 1987). And better problem solving can lead to more efficacious behavior. The **Positive Check-In Exercise** is a tool that can be used to take advantage of this principle.

Because most of our 4-H meetings bring youth together from different areas of the county representing a variety of age groups and interests, youth at these meetings simply do not interact with other youth everyday the way they would if they went to the same school or saw each other often. As a result, the county Extension agent may try implementing "the positive check-in" as the meeting's first order of business.

At the beginning of the meeting, the President should simply open the floor for responses to the question, "What is going on in your life that is positive?" It can be something as simple as an "A" on a test or as significant as the birth of a new sibling. This activity allows a few minutes of sharing among the group and helps people see what is important to them and what good things are currently happening in their life.

Pillar 3--Positive Feelings Repair the Negative Physical Consequences of Negative Feelings

The third pillar proposes that positive feelings repair the negative physical consequences of negative feelings. In addition, positive emotions can be intentionally induced, and cultivating positive emotions leads to optimum health and well-being. Fredrickson dubbed this the "Undoing Hypothesis," and her research suggests that positive emotions "undo" the lingering effects of negative emotions (2003). The **Alphabet Game** is an excellent lesson in showing what happens with negative feelings.

This activity is used to illustrate how some people are left out of participation, through no choice of their own. The goal of Alphabet Game is to teach participants the importance of inclusion and making everyone feel a part of the group. The facilitator (county Extension agent) simply hands out a letter to each participant. Letters should include common letters used in words (S, R, T, E, and A) and letters not used as much (Q, X, and Z) Then, the facilitator asks participants to build as many words as possible using their letters over a 2-minute time period. Once the 2 minutes are over, the facilitator asks participants how many words they got.

"Q" and "Z" generally get the fewest words because it is difficult to create words with these letters, so it is important to ask those individuals how they felt. The facilitator ties the discussion to the fact that sometimes people get left out of groups because they appear to be different than others. They may feel uncomfortable trying to fit in with a group of people not like them. Everyone wants to be accepted in a group like those with popular letters like the vowels. Being included elicits positive feelings, reduces anxiety, and fosters better creative thinking.

Conclusions

Building human capacity for living a happy and fulfilled life is one of the important objectives of Extension's mission. The empirically supported principles of positive psychology offer Extension professionals a new set of tools and techniques for accomplishing this. Try the activities presented in this article, and you will discover the power of positive psychology.

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