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Advancing Strength-Based Inclusive Mental Health Research in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Guest Editors: Luther G. Kalb and Joan B. Beasley
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Developmental Disabilities

Historically, views surrounding Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) have been driven by the medical model of disability. This approach frames IDD as an underlying pathology of human development and solutions to the problem of disability emerge from a single voice—medical experts. Until recently, the scientific research literature on IDD has reflected the same ethos as the medical model of disability. That is, the only scientifically credible research came from these same experts. This is especially true for mental health research in IDD.

The collection of articles represented in this special edition is designed to move the field in the opposite direction. Like the social model of disability, our focus is on inclusion and open access. When the call for articles was sent out to the large disability network, the editorial team made several requests. First, we requested research submissions conducted in partnership with persons with lived disability experience. We are pleased that most of the articles met this mission and are exemplified by articles on the *Person Experiences Interview Survey* and *Exploring Self-Determination*, both of which were led by a person with a disability. Second, we asked the research community to describe community-based programs that are building evidence to address disparities. This call was met with the response of the *Neuro-Inclusive Community Utah Project*, *Project Attain*, and the *Link Center*. Our third and final request was for positive psychological research on IDD. Unfortunately, we did not receive a wealth of articles on this topic. This lack of response is consistent with the broader dearth of strengths-based research in IDD.

The field of positive psychology was built on the humanistic model. It emphasizes understanding and promoting what is good with humanity, rather than pathologizing aspects of human life. Positive psychology is well aligned with the social model of disability—to promote well-being in people with IDD and mental health service needs. While positive psychology and other humanistic approaches do not ignore vulnerabilities and challenges faced, there is an emphasis on strength-based approaches to promote resilience in both facing the inevitable challenges in life and in flourishing beyond the challenges faced.

There are many different models and interventions in the positive psychology in the

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literature. Dr. Martin Seligman proposed the PERMA (Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) model, the Self-Determination theory promotes a tripartite framework (autonomy, competence, and relatedness). Cory Keyes was the first to coin the term “flourishing,” which appreciates the full spectrum of mental life from vitality to languishing. Typical positive psychological interventions focus on gratitude development, leveraging a person’s strengths, meditation/mindfulness interventions, nature exposure, and expanding social interactions.

Despite a wellspring of research on positive psychological theory and interventions in neurotypical populations, this work has not connected with persons with IDD. Positive psychology approaches can and should be studied to address the needs of people with IDD and mental health service experiences. We hoped to begin to help fill that gap with this issue. While our vision has not been fulfilled, we have some work that moves this field along, particularly in self-determination. Nevertheless, we still want to use this editorial as another call to action to advance positive psychology in IDD.

Like positive psychological research, there is still a gap to be filled in terms of collaboration between those with an IDD and researchers. Interest and work are growing, as reflected in this issue, and is a step in the right direction. However, it must be recognized that research is needed that meets the highest scientific standards, in terms of causal inference (e.g., randomized trials or causal observational models) or generalizability (e.g., probability-based sampling). This reflects where the field needs to go. We appreciate the efforts of *DDNJ* to take a step in the right direction.

The [National Research Consortium \(NRC\) on Mental Health in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities](#) offers funding to researchers interested in moving the field forward. Our collaboration with *DDNJ* will continue in this effort. For researchers who want to advance the field of mental health in IDD, especially those who partner with persons who have lived experience, we recommend visiting the NRC website for more details.