

Can Happiness be taught?

The effects on subjective wellbeing of attending a course in Positive Psychology that includes the practice of multiple interventions



I believe that happiness can be achieved through training the mind

His Holiness the Dalai Lama^[1]

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Definition

"Happiness is a positive emotional state that is subjectively defined by each person"^[2] and is characterised by "relatively high levels of positive affect, relatively low levels of negative affect, and the overall judgement that one's life is a good one"^[3].

Introduction

The *historical focus* of clinical psychology on mental illness has been understandable due to the urgent need to address conditions that have caused distress to individuals and society.

The *Positive Psychology* movement has as its aim, to redress the apparent imbalance in the psychological database caused by the extensive research into psychopathology, and the lack of equivalent robust research into positive aspects of human experience.

The database of knowledge as to *what makes us happy, and happier*, continues to grow, with many recent studies testing single interventions designed to increase happiness and decrease depression^[4]. In addition, evidence in forgiveness studies has shown that providing education is itself a potentially powerful intervention^[5].

This research project implements a course in Positive Psychology designed to educate participants and provide multiple validated interventions for practice.

The interventions included are the practice of Gratitude, Forgiveness, Hope, Optimism, Flow, Mindfulness, and use of Character Strengths.

It is expected that participants in this study will benefit from an increase in happiness and a decrease in depression.

This study is applied in a *New Zealand* context.

Method

Recruitment: Participants were recruited from community courses being held at UC Opportunity community education centre at the University of Canterbury.

Participants: The experimental group (EG) consisted of 33 attendees at a Positive Psychology course, and the control group (CG) consisted of 41 attendees at other community-based courses. Courses were held over 7 weeks for 2 hours per week, and included weekly homework.

Measures: Participants completed 6 questionnaires (9 subscales) that provided 6 'happiness' scores and 3 'unhappiness' (depression) scores.

Times: All questionnaires were completed by all participants (Total N=74, EG N=33, CG N=41) before the course (Time 1) and immediately after the course (Time 2). Two of the 'happiness' subscales were completed by some of the participants (Total N=65, EG N=29, CG N=36) 3 months later (Time 3).

Results

- A significant difference was found in changes to happiness and depression scores over time between the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG) participants.
- The EG participants attending the Positive Psychology course showed a tendency to increase happiness scores from before the course to after the course, with a smaller increase 3 months later. The CG participants showed a tendency to decrease happiness scores from before the course to after the course, with a smaller increase 3 months later.

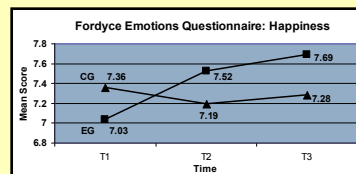


Figure 1: Happiness changes over time

- The EG participants had significantly more symptoms of depression before the course than the CG participants. After the course, EG participants had decreased depression and CG participants had increased depression, resulting in both groups at a similar level.

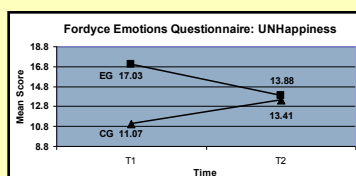


Figure 2: Depression changes over time

Conclusion

Results show that Positive Psychology courses have some benefit in increasing happiness levels and decreasing depression in participants.

Selected References*

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 - [4] Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). *Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions*. *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410-421.
 - [5] Harris, A. H. S., & Thoresen, C. E. (2006). *Extending the influence of positive psychology interventions into health care settings*. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1(1), 27-36.
- [* A full list of references is available from the author on request