Adolescence: Storm and stress or opportunity and growth?

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History of storm and stress

G. Stanley Hall (1904)
- Adolescence is a time of “storm and stress”.
- Conflict and dysfunction during adolescence is universal, inevitable, and biologically/developmentally based.
- Three core features:
  - High conflict with parents.
  - Mood disruptions.
  - Risky behaviours.

More recent perspectives

- “Adolescence is a difficult time of life for the teenager and their parents/teachers” (Buchanan et al., 1990).
- Storm and stress is not simply a myth… but a real part of life for adolescents and their families (Arnett, 1999).

Inherent challenges and changes

- Rapid physical, biological, and cognitive development (Christine & Viner, 2005; Kuhn, 2005).
- High prevalence of mental health problems; frequently corresponds with onset of pathology (Ravens-Sieber et al., 2008; Sawyer et al., 2000).
- High rates of risk taking behaviour (Kelley et al., 2004).
- Issues identified as highly concerning to adolescents include body image, family conflict, and stress (Mission Australia, 2010).
- Pressure to succeed in secondary school, make career choices, and to set up pathways and opportunities for the future.
Opportunity and growth

- Associated with increased independence, autonomy, and responsibility (Christine & Viner, 2005).
- Adolescents care deeply about their family and friends (Mission Australia, 2010; Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009).
- Many adolescents are passionate about the environmental and social justice issues (Mission Australia, 2010).

Flourishing in adolescence


Opportunity and growth

- While adolescence corresponds with substantial change and challenge, dysfunction is not inevitable, and efforts to help adolescents thrive and flourish are worthwhile and important.

What are your strengths?

- My gentlemanly like manner and my humorous behaviour.
- Understanding how people are feeling and where they are coming from.
- Ability to be open-minded.
- Ability to get along with a wide range of people.
- Compassion, determination, passion.
- The ability to put myself in someone else’s place.
- I am a good listener.
- Courage and bravery.
- Creativity and artistic passion.
Positive psychology + adolescence

Adolescence provides an invaluable opportunity to apply positive psychology:
1. Help adolescents and their families to weather the “storm and stress” and challenges involved in such dramatic biological, psychological, and social change.
2. Help adolescents develop skills that have a lasting positive impact.
3. Help adolescents to develop self knowledge about their strengths, values, and priorities that may help them to make self-concordant life and career choices.
4. Schools provide an amazing opportunity to communicate positive psychology to a wide audience.

Current research

Aim: To conduct a school-based randomised controlled trial of two positive psychology interventions.

Research questions:
1. Were they beneficial?
2. Did the students find them valuable?

Youth consultation

› Stage 1:
  • 28 adolescents completed phone interviews that explored their ideas on how to make interventions appealing and engaging.

› Stage 2:
  • 57 adolescents completed a online questionnaire where they recommended songs, youtube clips, and examples that could be included in the interventions to make them interactive and engaging.

Positive psychology (PP) workshop

- Strengths
- Gratitude
- Kindness
- Hope
- Pleasure
- Engagement
- Person-activity fit
- Meaning

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**Aim:**

To help students develop awareness of their strengths and enhance their ability to use and apply their strengths in flexible and adaptive ways.

**Background research:**

- Based on research that has found that identifying strengths and using them in new ways has benefits for happiness, mental health, and academic performance (Austin, 2005; Seligman et al. 2005; Wood et al. 2011).

**Content and activities:**

- Introduction to the strengths approach and the Values in Action framework (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).
- Exploration of students’ own strengths.
- Brainstorming ways of using strengths in new and creative ways.

**Aim:**

To help students live a full life by exploring, appreciating, and savouring the things that make life pleasurable, engaging, and meaningful.

**Background research:**

- Based on research that has found living a life high on pleasure, engagement, and meaning is associated with wellbeing (Peterson et al. 2005; Vella-Brodrick et al. 2009).

**Content and activities:**

- Introduction to the orientations to happiness.
- Exploring sources of pleasure, engagement, and meaning in own life.
- Brainstorming strategies of living a more full life.
- Savouring the things that make life pleasant, engagement, and meaningful.

**Aim:**

To help students cultivate and nurture positive relationships through gratitude and kindness.

**Background research:**

- Based on research that has found gratitude to have benefits for wellbeing and for relationship formation, satisfaction, and commitment (Froh et al. 2011; Wood et al. 2010).
- Based on research that has found kindness to be an important character strength and to be positively associated with wellbeing (Otake et al. 2006).

**Content and activities:**

- Exploring the roles of gratitude and kindness on relationships.
- Creation of a gratitude card for someone important.
- Identifying three good things activity.
- Brainstorming random acts of kindness.

**Aim:**

To help students to develop (realistic) hope about the futures and to develop the will (agency) and the way (pathways) to persist towards their goals (Snyder et al. 1991).

**Background research:**

- Based on research that has found hope to be consistently linked to good mental health and academic success (Snyder, 2002; Valle et al. 2006).

**Content and activities:**

- Introduction to Snyder’s hope model (i.e., goals, pathways, agency).
- Role plays and examples relevant to agency and pathways elements of hope.
- Creation of future possibilities collage.
Focused on exploring and savouring life’s simple pleasures and joys.

Underpinned by Fredrickson’s (2001) broaden-and-build theory that posits that experiencing positive emotions leads to increased wellbeing and resources over time.

Positive emotions → broadening of attention → building of resources → increased capacity to flourish.

Used simple savouring techniques such as attending to the senses and taking the time to appreciate daily experiences (Bryant, 2007).

Method

- **Participants**:
  - 95 year 10 students from a Victorian public school.
  - Aged 14 to 17 (M age = 15.22; SD = .54).

- **Procedure**
  - Training of teachers to deliver the program.
  - Random allocation of students to three conditions.
  - Comparison condition: school’s usual health day (safe sex, drug and alcohol awareness, partying safely).

- **Measures**
  - Student’s Satisfaction with Life Scale (Huebner, 1991).
  - Warrick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (Stewart-Brown et al., 2009).
  - Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale - Short Form (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).
  - Qualitative questions that explored students’ perceptions of the workshops.

Research design

- Training of teachers to deliver the PP and SP workshops.
- Recruitment and pre-intervention assessment.
- Positive psychology workshop
- Simple pleasures workshop
- Non-intervention control condition
- Post-intervention assessment
- 7 week follow up assessment

Simple pleasures workshop (SP)

- **Introduction**:
  - Welcome and exploration of life’s simple pleasures.
  - Discussion of the importance of negative emotions and avenues for help seeking.

- **Taste**:
  - Savouring taste activity

- **Sight**:
  - Exploration of the importance of sight.
  - Undertaking simple tasks (e.g., making clay animals) while blindfolded.

- **Sound**:
  - Examination of the power of music and sound in evoking emotions.
  - Selection of favourite songs and exploration of strategies for savouring sound.

- **Touch**:
  - Exploration of the importance of touch and the role of personal contact (e.g., hugs) in happiness.

- **Smell**:
  - Discussion of the power of smell. Activities based on identifying different smells.

- **Summary and conclusions**:
  - Creation of simple pleasures collages.
Results

Time 1 to Time 2: Life Satisfaction Change

Time 1 to Time 3: Life Satisfaction Change

Time 1 to Time 2: Wellbeing Change

Time 1 to Time 3: Wellbeing Change
Overall, participants reported significantly increased life satisfaction and wellbeing and decreased anxiety post-intervention. While the trends were in the expected direction, group differences were not significant and results were not maintained at Time 3. Reasons for this may be (1) relatively low sample size; (2) short duration of workshops. The SP program appeared to be most beneficial despite being less comprehensive. Perhaps this is due to increased depth and understanding and ‘quality over quantity’.
Results: PP

How engaging/interesting did you find the workshop sessions?

Which session did you have the largest person-activity fit with?

Results: Overall value

Positive feedback

- This was really fun. It really showed the positive side of life for me*.
- I learnt stuff*.
- It couldn’t possibly get any better. It was fantastic*.
- I learnt interesting information about mental health*.
- It taught me about what’s really important in life and how to enjoy the simple pleasures. It taught me about my own strengths and how I should be grateful for what I have*.
- Loved it and loved the chocolate.
- I actually enjoyed my day at school.
Negative feedback

- Could have had more practical and exciting activities∗.
- Could have been more related to us individually∗.
- It would have been nice to go outside∗.
- It could have been more hands-on and fun.
- Could have been more engaging and less stale.
- Oh no... not a workbook!

Key messages

- Adolescence as a time of change and challenge but also growth and possibility.
- Despite the short time period, results of the study were promising but not conclusive.
- With some exceptions, the students valued the workshops - some students really loved them.
- It is possible that more depth/focus/time is important for changing wellbeing.
- Future research based on extended versions of the interventions is warranted.

Future directions

- Extended the PP program to 10 x 1.5 hour sessions and collaborating with Drs Suzy Green, Dianne Vella-Brodrick, and Tony Grant on a randomised controlled trial comparing the PP program with a cognitive-behavioural solution focused coaching program.
- Continue youth consultation and feedback from professionals to increase student engagement.

Take home message

- Adolescence as a time of change and challenge but also growth and possibility.
- The contribution positive psychology can make to this important life stage is to redirect focus away from storm and stress and towards strengths and opportunities.