

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

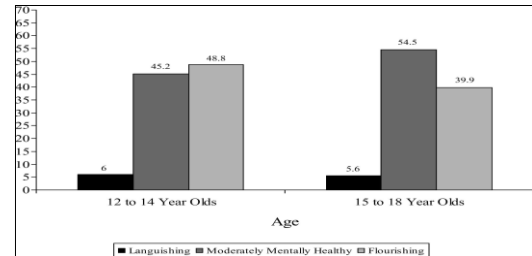
- ▶ Rapid physical, biological, and cognitive development (Christine & Viner, 2005; Kuhn, 2005).
- ▶ High prevalence of mental health problems; frequently corresponds with onset of pathology (Ravens-Sieber et al., 2008; Sawyer et al., 2000).
- ▶ High rates of risk taking behaviour (Kelley et al., 2004).
- ▶ 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



Keyes, C. L. M. (2006). Mental health in adolescence: Is America's youth flourishing? *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76, 395-402.

## 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:

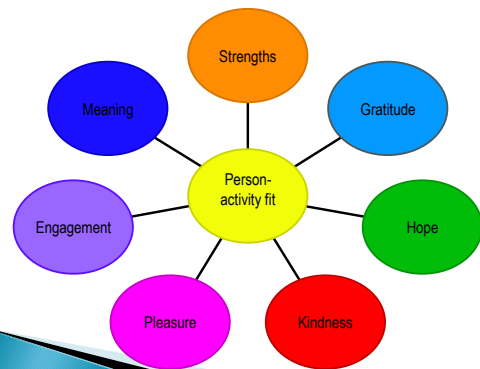
1. Were they beneficial?
2. Did the students find them valuable?



## 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



## PP: Strengths

### 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.



## PP: Orientations to happiness

### 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.



## PP: Positive relationships

### Aims:

- ▶ 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.



## PP: Hope

### Aims:

- ▶ 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.



## Simple pleasures workshop (SP)

- › 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).



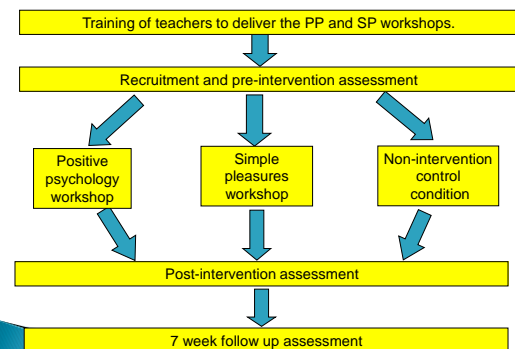
## Simple pleasures workshop (SP)

1. Introduction:
  - › Welcome and exploration of life's simple pleasures.
  - › Discussion of the importance of negative emotions and avenues for help seeking.
2. Taste:
  - › Savouring taste activity
3. Sight:
  - › Exploration of the importance of sight.
  - › Undertaking simple tasks (e.g., making clay animals) while blindfolded.
5. Sound:
  - › Examination of the power of music and sound in evoking emotions.
  - › Selection of favourite songs and exploration of strategies for savouring sound.
6. Touch:
  - › Exploration of the importance of touch and the role of personal contact (e.g., hugs) in happiness.
7. Smell:
  - › Discussion of the power of smell. Activities based on identifying different smells.
8. Summary and conclusions:
  - › Creation of simple pleasures collages.

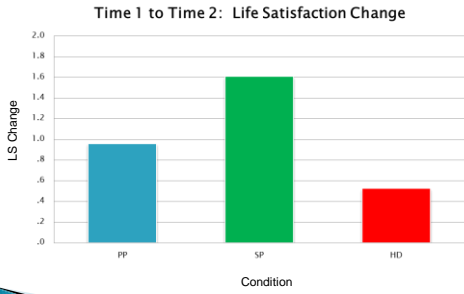
## Method

- › **Participants:**
  - 90 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



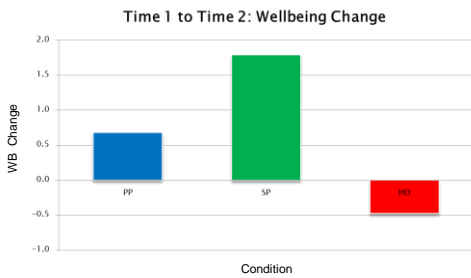
## Results



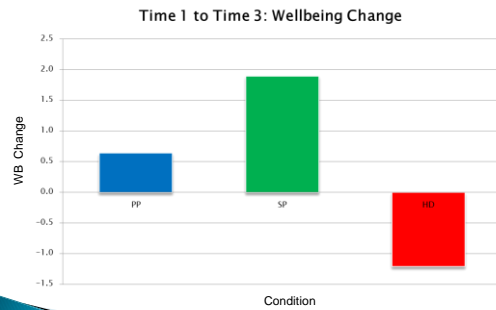
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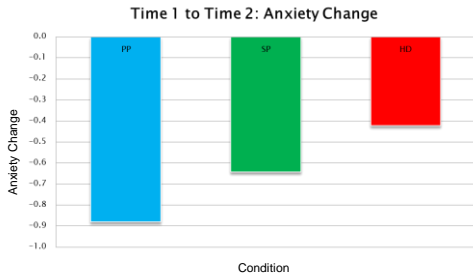
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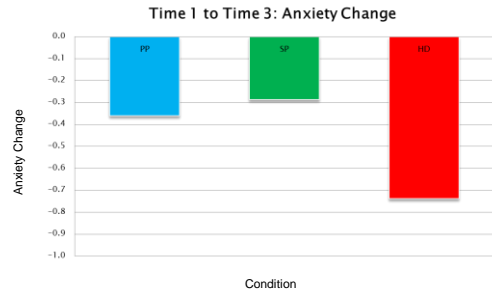
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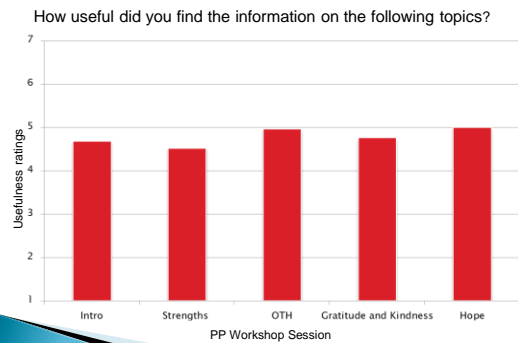
## Results



## Were they beneficial?

- 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



## Results: PP

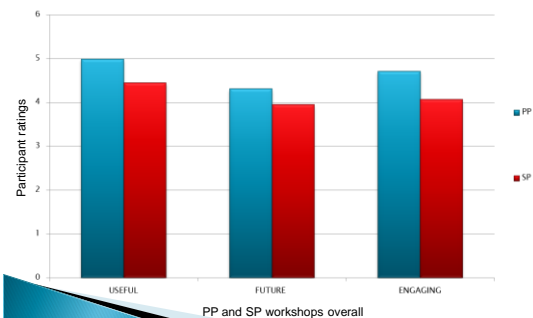


## Results: PP

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.



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