

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

USEABLE KNOWLEDGE

What on earth can we do with a concept called “positive psychology”? Should the rest of psychology be labelled negative then? And who gets to judge what counts as positive? Is it positive to smile at your boss if you disagree profoundly with her decisions? Does being positive mean going against our better judgment? Is it positive to motivate staff to work harder if they are already doing their best? We know the questions; they arise whenever positive psychology is discussed. And they are important because the idea of positive psychology can be stifling – and knowledge can be abused.

However, the fact that knowledge can be abused is not a good argument for rejecting it – as all things being equal there is a greater chance of getting into trouble if we do not know what is going on. For example, if we do not know that psychologically we are more inclined to feel bad than good, we obviously risk feeling extraordinarily bad. Or at least worse than we would otherwise.

Knowledge opens opportunities for us and positive psychology does not claim to be anything more than useable knowledge.

A (NEW) PSYCHOLOGICAL FIELD

In 1954, psychologist Abraham Maslow, father of the “hierarchy of needs”, published his seminal book *Motivation and Personality*. The concluding chapter, “Toward a Positive Psychology”, argues that psychology, which had previously been based largely on animal testing and studies of mental disorders, should focus much more on the aspects of human existence that make life worth living. At the turn of the millennium, psychology *had* moved in this direction, through the establishment of so-called humanistic psychology. Many leading psychologists still thought that it was inadequate, however. In 1998, psychologist Martin Seligman, newly elected chairman of the American Psychological Association, decided with his colleague Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to continue Maslow’s project. The initiative received broad support and after extensive intercollegial discussions it was named “positive psychology”.

Since then, positive psychology as a research field has expanded steadily. It has its own scientific journals, networks and associations, and involves scientists and practitioners all over the world. Positive psychology is now defined by the International Positive Psychology Association as the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. This booklet provides a broad introduction to the subject.

THE STRUGGLE TO LIVE

What does it mean to thrive? Let us start by looking at what is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of life: *activity*. Like all other living organisms, we are driven from birth by a deep, pervasive impulse to be active, to fight to remain alive, to learn and understand as much as possible, as fast and easily as possible. Our ultimate goal is to control our own situations and destinies to the best of our abilities, instead of wasting away as helpless victims and slaves to the will of others.

We know instinctively that activity is life-affirming and inactivity the opposite. Boredom is a good example of this instinct; the fear of being trapped is another. Parents worry that lack of confidence will impede their children's development. A child who never really experiences success at school can become so pessimistic that its negative outlook becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, while a child who does not make friends may wind up completely socially stuck. Parents struggle, therefore, to ensure that their children experience success and are not socially excluded. Deep down, we all know that it is not just "idleness" but inactivity in general that is the root of all evil, and it is therefore evil to force people to be inactive. We obviously have to discipline ourselves, but we must learn to do this *actively* by understanding *why* we have to conform – as children, parents, colleagues, or citizens. Otherwise, we become dysfunctional.

LEARNED APATHY

Yet, many of us are almost indoctrinated to forget how important activity is, and led into ways of thinking that are blatantly self-destructive, for example that we simply must “learn to be bored” (inactively). Without further explanation (meaningless). Such indoctrination even occurs in educational contexts where we need inspiration more than anywhere else. This happens even though every child is born with a desire for learning as the most natural, life-affirming and pleasurable thing, and even though we learn much more if we are motivated, i.e. inspired, interested, and engaged. It happens even though every child is born with the capacity for boredom: boredom is an important alarm that signals that time is being wasted. Of course we can learn from our mistakes – in school and everywhere else – but it should rarely be our first priority. Problems and crises can obviously teach us a lot, but in general we function much better when we do *not* have problems and are *not* in crisis.

MEANINGLESS SELF-DISCIPLINE IS SELF-DESTRUCTIVE

I am not saying that discipline is not important either. On the contrary: being capable of pulling yourself together is very important. Recent studies actually show that hard work at school and in the workplace means twice as much for your success than your talent. But the hard work must be based on genuine interest and pas-

sion. Exams and awards you never really wanted are not worth very much.

And yes, children must learn to be considerate. But again: apart from in the earliest childhood, such learning should only happen when children see a positive reason for it. Conforming to an authority – at school, at work, anywhere – without understanding why a particular behavior is reasonable is like entering a treacherous swamp of pacifying pointlessness, which will surely damage us if sustained over time. “Why” and “because” are very important words for us.

SEIZE THE DAY, NO MATTER WHAT!

So whether we are active or inactive in our everyday lives is not simply a question of whether we choose to get up in the morning. *It is no less than a question of whether we wholeheartedly engage in the world or not – whether we seize the day or not.* Our understandings of and answers to this fundamental question are becoming more and more nuanced through psychological science, which is no longer exclusively focused on the treatment of individuals mired in unhappiness, but increasingly informs us in creating frameworks that improve our potential to thrive and function together and even limit the likelihood of developing mental disorders. And this, more preventive, more health and wellbeing promoting, more strength-based research, has come to be called “positive psychology”.

NOT UNTIL THE DAMAGE IS DONE

Since psychological knowledge is available to everyone, we might think that people would naturally accept it without reservation. As it turns out, it has not been accepted so easily. Indeed, psychology has commonly and for many years been seen as something rather embarrassing, a concern primarily for people with problems and deficiencies, especially in their heads; triggering subsidies only if one had the right symptoms. For example, students typically have to exhibit learning disabilities or mental problems in order to be “recommended” for “diagnosing”. A general interest in psychology has rarely been a sufficient reason for requiring an appointment with a psychologist. As with medical doctors, you rarely contact them unless you are hurting already.

Psychology and health science have thus acquired an image strongly associated with illness. This is a shame, and it does not have to be this way. It is difficult to change, however: traditions have deep roots, and public subsidies are mainly channeled towards damage that has already occurred, rather than damage we want to prevent.

COSTLY SAVINGS

Approximately 5 % of the Danish health sector budget is currently spent on preventive, health-promoting initiatives; the rest is spent on people who are already ill. And this in spite of the fact that most health economists agree that prevention is far cheaper than treatment.