

LIANOV Liana

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY FOR MENTAL WELLBEING DURING TURBULENT TIMES

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Liana LIANOV

MD, MPH, President and Founder of Global Positive Health Institute (USA)

<https://positivehealth.world/>

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCI6eO6kkPnuQSJkSl09qdtA>

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Abstract. The efficiency of positive psychology tools for mental health in times of adversity (war and other traumatic experiences) is put into focus. Positive emotions can help create psychological resources, life satisfaction, optimism and a sense of tranquility despite the situation of crisis. Boosting positive emotions, developing character strengths and social connectedness are considered in this talk in relation to the post-traumatic growth.

Key words: positive psychology, emodiversity, positivity resonance, post-traumatic growth, social connectedness, character strengths, positive health, well-being.

What is positive psychology? As defined by Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, it is the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life. It's about less emphasis on human deficits and fixing our pathology and more emphasis on what is good and improving our well-being and leveraging and using our human strengths.

I have a **lifestyle medicine** background and have been a leader and physician in lifestyle medicine for a number of years, and in the practice of lifestyle medicine where we use a healthy lifestyle to not only prevent but treat many chronic diseases, lifestyle related diseases. We see a very important role for positive psychology and positive emotions. The main elements of a healthy lifestyle are nutrition, physical activity, sleep health, social connectedness and positive psychology activities related to the connectedness, avoiding and reducing stress and avoiding risky substances use. The foundation for those healthy behaviors is positive emotion, and positive psychology approaches can help to boost that positive emotion. Through these healthy behaviors changes we can achieve total well-being and positive health: physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual health.

Now for this talk I'm going to be focusing particularly on positive psychology approaches for our mental health during very difficult times, during crisis, during trauma.

There is a large body of literature that links positive psychology with activities and mindsets that are created during suffering, during adversity and during trauma. In fact, in one review there were over 18 000 studies that looked at various positive psychology processes and how these processes are used to recover and rebuild from adversity, and that includes things like mental toughness, resilience, hardiness, a sense of

meaning, compassion, forgiveness and post-traumatic growth. We'll take a look at some of these. A couple of very specific examples are the use of character strengths, which is the large area of positive psychology, and how it moderated the relationship between political violence and post-traumatic stress disorder for young people who were exposed to lengthy periods of war and political conflict. So helping young people to use their character strengths really mitigated the negative effects of those kinds of exposures.

Also positive emotions, which are the foundation of positive psychology, can help create psychological resources, life satisfaction, optimism and a sense of tranquility – and this has been found in surveys where they compared people who experienced the September, 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the US, they compared them before and after [1]. Those positive emotions made a difference in the psychological growth and having those psychological resources. So in times of adversity, we can still, despite those difficult times and challenges, live with dignity and purpose, and the positive psychology literature has shown this. There are studies of people who experienced losses and trauma, grief, post-traumatic stress disorder, symptoms of exposure to violence and life threatening events – and many people do endure successfully and move on successfully. They might have some initial disruptions in their functioning, they might have sleep problems, restlessness, cognitive disorganization and much more; but over time they do move on and, in fact, at least 50% of the people in these kinds of studies can endure trauma and come out stronger as a result of that experience that we call “post-traumatic growth”.

So what is the role of positive psychology in mental health specifically? I'm really grateful for the article by Dr Lea Waters and her esteemed positive psychology colleagues [1] on positive psychology in the pandemic. They did a lovely review, and much of that review applies to well beyond the pandemic in all kinds of turbulent times, especially the kinds of times that we are dealing with now with war and other threats. They divided the role of positive psychology in mental health into three buckets. First, there is (1) **buffering** – which is that positive psychology can help to diminish psychological ill health during crisis. Then, there is (2) **bolstering** – where positive psychology can help maintain and promote mental health despite the crisis. Finally, there is (3) **building** – which is that through the crisis we are transformed and our mental health is actually even better and it gives us the resources for improved mental health in the future – and that is because through the crisis we may have learned new activities, for example, greater use of our strengths, we may have learned new mental processes, such as more self-compassion, and we may have garnered new perspectives, like an enhanced sense of meaning.

So we are going to dive into some of these areas of positive psychology and their role in trauma and adverse experiences. I'm starting off with positive emotions first and foremost which underlies the entire field and is the driver of the benefits of positive psychology science and how we can apply it.

I would like to emphasize that positive emotions can coexist with negative ones. So just because we are talking about boosting joy, love and these kinds of positive emotions during this global crisis, it does not mean that we are going to be turning away

from emotions of fear and grief. Positive psychology is not about only having positive emotions. Positive psychology is about our humanity, it's about our full range of emotions, that we call "emodiversity", and embracing all of what we experience having a self-compassion for that and then doing what we can to shift our attention, focus and activities to the extent possible to more positive ones. Even in our brains, our positive and negative emotions are not mutually exclusive, they are not on the same spectrum. They actually function in different areas of the brain on different levels: one is more around the range of negative emotions that comprises mental illness, and the other is on the range of positive emotions and comprises positive health and positive well-being. The emotions within those can be quite fleeting and that's why we are able to actually experience both. So patients who have depression, for example, can experience moments of joy, and those moments of joy can add up to build and bolster some satisfaction. In fact, in our daily lives, to the extent that we can increase our positive emotions, this helps us in current times to improve our mental health but also in that building capacity to be prepared to better manage our mental health during challenging times.

Emotions are fleeting, so positive emotions are fleeting. Even in mental illness, depression, for example, or during very difficult times, we can have these flashes of positive emotions of joy, gratitude, serenity, high interest in others, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, a sense of awe. Even if we can just experience those emotions for fleeting moments or seconds, if we can have a number of those throughout our days, throughout our time, it adds up to contribute to our health and well-being and our overall perspective on life and life satisfaction.

A special kind of positive emotion is **positivity resonance**: it's when two people co-experience these pleasant emotions together with mutual caring and synchronies, meaning, at the same time they are experiencing these positive emotions. Through that there is positivity resonance which is not only emotionally beneficial for both people or even a group of people that are simultaneously experiencing these positive emotions, but physiologically they have that benefit at the same time of the improved emotions having an impact on lowering their blood pressure, lowering their cortisol, lowering their blood sugar, for example. Social connectedness is a very important positive psychology tool in this case.

The bottom line is that positive emotions are fundamental to our well-being. They change the way our human brain works by broadening our cognitive awareness; and especially during times of crises we need those positive emotions to broaden our awareness and our cognition, perhaps, even to survive, it gives us some ingenuity and new ways of thinking that may get us out of tight situations. Positive emotions allow us to take in more information that does help us build on resources to help us with coping during adversity. Barbara Fredrickson [3] and other positive psychology researchers have also looked at this upward spiral theory or upward spiral dynamic which is reciprocal: so as we have a good fortune and/or do certain positive psychology based activities and boost our emotions, then over time through this broadening and building of our cognition, adding more resources, being more aware of our surroundings in a positive way, looking at opportunities in a positive way, over time we are able to create even

more good fortune for ourselves – and it is this upward spiral. Having the good fortune, we have more positive emotions – positive emotions allow us the resources to build more good fortune. In this case the good fortune can literally mean life or death in situations of war and crises, where, perhaps, you are able to think more broadly and get yourself out of very tight situations.

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