

The Role of Positive Psychology in Influencing Youth Mental Well-being and Health: International and Local Evidence of Behavioural Vaccines

Dr. Albert Liao

In general, I consider myself

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
not a very a very
happy person happy person



1. Which one would you rather be?

2. Which one is more happy?

Tsai, Louie, Chen & Uchida, 2007

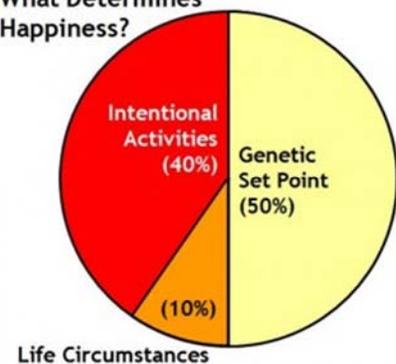
There is scientific evidence from positive psychology that we can improve our well-being.

Will these methods work for us in an Asian context?

What have we learned from Positive Psychology?

- Which do you think is the main factor influencing one's happiness:
 1. Genetically determined set point
 2. Life circumstances
 3. Daily intentional activities

What Determines Happiness?



Lyubomirsky (2008)

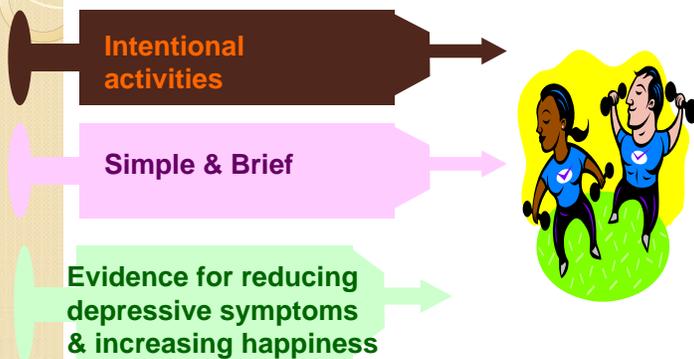
Benefits of Happiness

- College students who were happier had higher salaries 16 years later
 - (Diener et al., 2002)
- Women who expressed more joy in college had more satisfying marriages at age 52
 - (Harker & Keltner, 2001)
- See review by Lyubomirsky et al., 2005

Benefits of Happiness

- 1 year later, happy and mentally healthy students had
 - the highest average math skills,
 - the highest GPAs and
 - best school attendance.
 - (Suldo et al., 2011)
- Dual factor model of mental health
 - Subjective well-being
 - Psychopathology

Behavioral Vaccines



Why teach behavioral vaccines?

- 1. prevent depression
- 2. they are supported by scientific evidence that they reap the benefits of improved well-being and/or lower depressive symptoms

- **The World Health Organization predicts that by 2020 more people will be affected by depression than any other health problem.**
- According to the WHO, depression will be the biggest health burden on society both economically and sociologically.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8230549.stm>

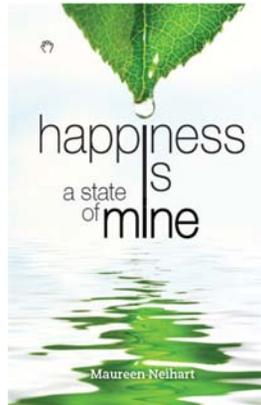
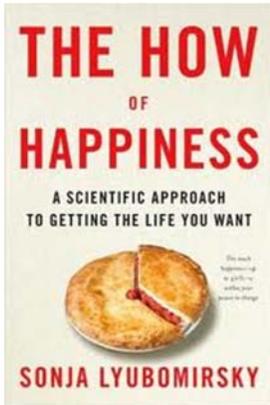
Mental Health in Singapore

- Young people, aged 18 to 29, are at higher risk of having mental health problems than older people
- 6600 in 2010

	18-29	> 30
Depression	1 in 14	1 in 19
OCD	1 in 24	1 in 37
Alcohol	1 in 33	1 in 32

Source: Today, May 3 2012

Scientific Evidence for Behavioral Vaccines



Please stand up

OR
Please stretch
your hands up



Think of 3 things
you are grateful
for today!

OR

Post on your
facebook page 3
things you are
thankful for today

Shake the hands
of the person
beside you and
introduce yourself

OR

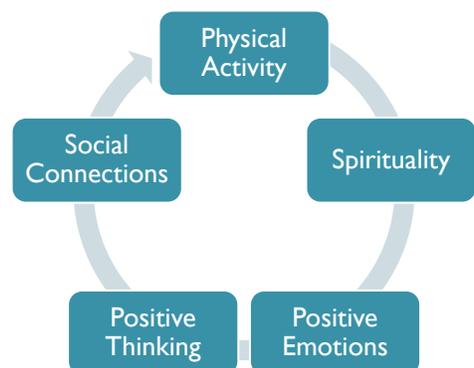
Send a social
media message to
a friend

Choose one of
your strengths
and think of how
you can use it
today!

OR

Choose one of
your strengths
and think of how
you can use it
this week!

Behavioral Vaccines



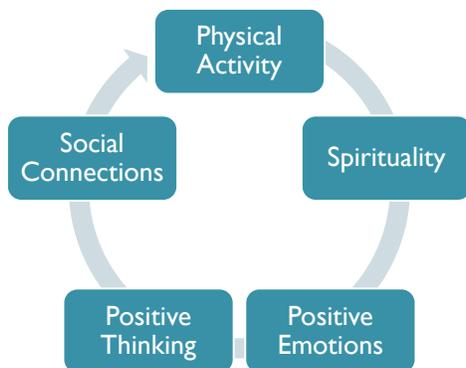
Physical Activity

Spirituality, Religion & Meditation

Half an hour's meditation each day is essential, except when you are busy. Then a full hour is needed – St Francis de Sales

Shauna Shapiro

Behavioral Vaccines



Gratitude Activity (Count your blessings)

“There are many things in our lives, both large and small, that we might be grateful about. Think back over the past week and write down on the lines below up to five things in your life that you are grateful or thankful for.”

Emmons & McCullough (2003)

Effects of gratitude

- More positive feelings (joyful, enthusiastic, interested, attentive, energetic, excited, determine & strong)
- More satisfaction with life
- More optimism
- Better physical health
- Slept better
- More exercising
- Helping others more



The Theory

- Fredrickson's Broaden & Build Theory:
 - Positive emotions **broadens** an individual's mindset
 - Helps to **build** enduring personal resources.

Effective for a variety of people

- Psychology undergraduates (Emmons et al, 2003)
- Neuromuscular Disease (Emmons et al., 2003)
- Online adult sample with mild depression (Seligman et al., 2005)
- Adolescents (Froh et al., 2008)
- Malaysian psychology undergraduates (Senf & Liau, 2011)

Optimism: Your Best Possible Selves

- Spend 20 minutes writing a description of your “best possible future self”. In other words, imagine your future in all its domains and describe what would be the best possible scenario.
- *Variation:* Participants were asked to write about a time when they were at their best and then to reflect on the personal strengths displayed in the story.

Evidence for BPS

- U.S. College Students
 - King (2001; 4 times over 4 days)
 - Results: increase in positive affect, decrease in illness
 - Sheldon & Lyubomirsky (2006; 3 times over 4 weeks)
 - Results: increase in positive affect
- Dutch college students
 - Peters et al. (2010; 1 time)
 - Results: Increase in positive affect & optimism
 - Meevissen et al. (2011; 1 time)
 - Results: Increase in optimism

Strengths

- Complete the VIA Signature Strengths inventory:
 - Access the VIA Signature Strengths website at: <http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx>
 - Every day for the next seven days use one of your top five strengths in a way that you have not before. You might use your strength in a new setting or with a new person. It's your choice.

Strengths

- Increase in happiness & decrease in depressive symptoms after a 1-week intervention
- Changes still significant after 6 months!
- (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005)

Moderating Factors

- Timing and dosage matters
- Count blessings 1x per week for 6 weeks
> Count blessings 3x per week
- Fit and Effort matters
- Culture matters too!

Will Behavioral Vaccines work for Asians?

- Gratitude
- Strengths
- Optimism (Best Possible Self)

Different kinds of happiness?

Cross-cultural researchers (Joshua Loewenstein & Weijers, 2013) have argued that the pursuit of happiness that is a preoccupation of Western societies may be viewed differently in non-Western cultures



1. Which one would you rather be?

2. Which one is more happy?

Tsai, Louie, Chen & Uchida, 2007

Cultural difference in ideal affect

- Americans preferred high arousal positive affect – enthusiastic, excited, elated
- East Asians preferred low arousal positive affect – calm, relaxed, peaceful

Affect Valuation Theory

- Self-report surveys
- Parent-child interactions
- Children's storybooks
- Adult popular magazines
- Dating couples
- Religious texts

- Different behavioral consequences
- “although most people want to feel good, people want to feel good in different ways” (Tsai, 2007, p.252)

Local Evidence for Behavioral Vaccines

- Gratitude
 - Senf & Liao (2012)
 - Ng & Liao (2015)
 - Lin & Liao (2014)
- Optimism (Best Possible Self)
 - Liao et al. (2014)
- Strengths
 - Senf & Liao (2012)

Trend in our Local Studies

The BPS and gratitude vaccines were successful in decreasing Negative Affect but not Positive Affect

Change in Negative Affect

The finding of a change in NA instead of PA suggests a potential important cultural difference in the effects of vaccines that increase well-being.

Perhaps, in Asian contexts, vaccines increase well-being by decreasing NA instead of increasing PA. Changes in NA rather than PA play a more important role in influencing well-being.

Leu, J., Wang, J., & Koo, K. (2011, March 28). Are Positive Emotions Just as Positive Across Cultures?. *Emotion*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/a0021332

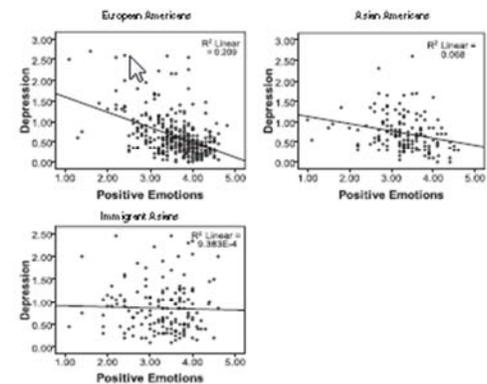


Figure 1. Scatter plots of the correlation between positive emotions and frequency of depression symptoms among European Americans ($r = -.46^{***}$), Asian Americans ($r = -.26^{**}$), and Immigrant Asians ($r = -.03$) (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$).

A more dominant role of negative affect for Asians?

The more dominant role of negative affect is consistent with various cross-cultural research.

Asians generally exhibit more negativity than Caucasians (Wong et al., 2009)

Negative affect plays a more important role than just positive affect (Kormi-Nouri, 2013; Leu et al., 2011).

Conclusion

“Should people from non-Westernised or collectivist cultures be encouraged to pursue ever-greater personal well-being?” (Boehm et al., 2011, p. 8)

Preliminary yes as this study has provided evidence that perhaps in Asian contexts, behavioral vaccines increase well-being by decreasing NA instead of increasing PA.

THANK YOU!

Which is your favorite behavioral vaccines?

- Notes can be found at:
- <http://myroyalrae.com/happiness-talk/>



albert.liau@nie.edu.sg

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