Building Happiness, Resilience and Motivation in Adolescents
What is Positive Psychology?

Positive psychology is an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions and positive character traits. It is concerned with what makes people flourish, that is, become happier, more connected to others and engaged in purposeful, meaningful activity.

It was launched as a new discipline in 1998 by Martin Seligman, the then president of the American Psychological Association.

Research findings from positive psychology are not meant to replace traditional psychology and what is known about human suffering, weakness and disorder. The aim is to have a complete and balanced understanding of the human experience.
A strengths approach focusing on ‘what works well’ and individual strengths and talents works at three levels:

1. the individual level, whether that is the individual staff member or student
2. the classroom or class group level
3. the whole school level.

Ideally all three levels will work together; however, small changes at the individual level can have a positive effect – small differences can make a big difference.
‘Subjective Well-being’ is the Scientific Term for Happiness

Well-being has five measurable elements (PERMA):

1. positive emotion, of which happiness and life satisfaction are aspects
2. engagement
3. relationships
4. meaning
5. achievement.¹

What is Flourishing?

To flourish an individual needs the three core features of well-being:

1. positive emotion (or happiness)
2. engagement and interest
3. meaning and purpose

and three of the six additional features:

1. self-esteem
2. optimism
3. resilience
4. vitality
5. self-determination
6. positive relationships.¹

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What You Can Do to Get Well-being

The task of positive psychology is to *describe* not *prescribe* what people can do to get well-being. The findings can be neatly summarised as:

- Increasing positive emotions.
- Reducing the impact of negative emotions.
- Changing the subject: thinking about others rather than ourselves and engaging in purposeful activity.
- Finding meaning in one’s life.¹

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Increase Positive Emotions

The ‘Broaden-and-Build’ theory of positive emotions developed by Barbara Fredrickson\(^1\) shows that positive emotions are ‘resource builders’ and have a long-lasting effect on our personal growth and development. Positive emotions have the capacity to broaden and build our psychological and social resources, promote our physical health, connect us to others and build our intellectual and psychological reserves. They increase our capacity to be outward looking and pay attention and notice what is happening around us, and increase our working memory, verbal fluency and openness to information.

The Sparkle of Good Feelings

‘Positivity’ triggers the sparkle of good feelings that awakens an individual’s inspiration and motivation to change.

Positivity refers to the whole range of positive emotions to include joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, awe, inspiration and love.

Building a robust Losada ratio (i.e. having more positive thoughts than negative thoughts) and having positive emotions more frequently than negative emotions builds psychological and social capital.
According to Seligman, ‘engagement’ is an essential component of well-being. Engagement is achieved through flow.

Flow is a term coined by the Russian psychologist Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi (pronounced ‘cheeks sent me high’) that refers to a state of optimal experience and involvement in an activity during which we are performing at our best.

Flow is:

- being at one with ‘the music’, that is, an activity that has clear goals
- time stopping
- the loss of self-consciousness during an absorbing activity
- intrinsically rewarding and motivating.
Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi suggests that flow has the following eight ingredients:

1. We are involved in tasks that we have a good chance of completing.
2. We are able to fully concentrate on the activity.
3. The task has clear goals.
4. The task provides immediate feedback on how well we are doing.
5. Our involvement in the task is ‘deep but effortless’ and this involvement takes away the worries and frustration of everyday life.
6. We have a sense of exercising a sense of control over our actions.
7. ‘Concerns for the self disappear’ but our ‘sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over’.
8. We lose our usual sense of time.¹

Peterson and Seligman\textsuperscript{1} identified 24 signature (higher) strengths. These are organised into the six virtues which are universal characteristics that are emphasised by philosophers and religious leaders:

1. Wisdom and knowledge
2. Courage
3. Love and humanity
4. Justice
5. Temperance
6. Transcendence.

Character Strengths and Flow

When our signature strengths are used to meet the challenge involved in flow activities we feel energised, creative and capable.

The more we can identify and build our character strengths and recognise how we are using them the happier, more energised and effective we will feel.

Being able to put a name to what we do well is intriguing and empowering.
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Identify Your Signature Strengths

Characteristics of signature strengths:

- They represent the real you.
- They bring a feeling of excitement when they are used.
- A person excels in their signature strengths quickly.
- A person longs to put them into action.
- A person feels energised and intrinsically motivated when using them.
- They can be applied to learning, work, relationships and play.¹

Why Engaging With Our Strengths and Talents is Important

- Rise in mental health problems.
- The impact of advertising on students’ perceptions of themselves and their expectations.
- The growing fear in society as a result of the rise of the threat of terrorism, the recession and increase in unemployment, increase in crime levels and rioting.
- Family/community breakdown, increase of divorce, social isolation.
- Increased expectations and pressures on young people.
Character Strengths and Talents

According to positive psychologists, strengths and talents are both essential for human flourishing. There are, however, important differences between them:

- Strengths are moral traits, talents are non-moral.
- Talents are largely innate, character strengths are more ‘voluntary’ – we can choose to develop them.
- Strengths cannot be squandered; however, we can choose not to use a talent.

Character strengths are more ‘buildable’ than talents: with practice, persistence, good teaching and dedication they can take root and flourish. Strengths can be acquired by almost any individual as long as there is time, effort and commitment.
Knowing and Following One’s Character Strengths

Knowing and following one’s character strengths:

- encourages insight and perspective in one’s life
- generates optimism
- provides a sense of direction
- helps to develop optimism
- generates a sense of vitality
- brings a sense of fulfilment
- helps achieve one’s goals.¹

The aim of the programme is to introduce students to the concept of character strengths, enable them to identify their signature (higher) strengths and develop new ways of using them.

The programme is presented in six sections; each section represents one of the six virtues. The virtues are made up of 24 character strengths. There is a chapter or session for each character strength.
The programme relates directly to the students’ experiences. It is about enabling young people to experience their character strengths in practice.

The guiding principle should be that the students should be enabled to:

1. recognise their character in action
2. reflect on their usefulness for their lives
3. discover new ways of using their signature (higher) strengths.¹

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A Three-stage Cyclical Process

Teaching the programme involves a three-stage cyclical process:

1. awareness
2. intervention and action
3. evaluation and reflection.¹

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Concluding the Programme

- Optimism, flow and happy memories are essential to happiness.¹
- Emotional memories depend upon how an experience concludes.²

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