

## **Art Therapy from a Positive Psychology Perspective**

### **Creative Wellbeing Workshops, LLC**

Positive psychology emerges out of the presumption that the profession of psychology, although noble in its intent, has focused more on repairing weakness and alleviating suffering than on examining the conditions and processes that contribute to well-being.

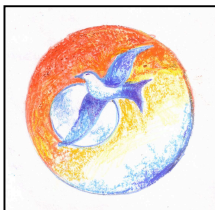
Positive psychologists propose that even the most troubled individuals want more than just the relief of suffering, they want lives filled with joy, meaning, and purpose.

Positive psychology identifies “paths” to increasing wellbeing: positive emotions and experience; positive engagement; relationships; meaning and purpose; and accomplishment. They suggest that relationship and connection are fundamental to all of these domains.



The field of Art Therapy, established in the early 50s, harnesses the healing potential of the creative process to promote healing, reduce suffering, and improve well-being. By engaging right brain activity, art therapy allows access to and expression of feelings, thoughts, and experiences not always available through verbal means alone. Doing art induces experiences of flow and evokes the relaxation response. Exploring the imagery that emerges through artistic expression allows us examine our experience and our lives in novel ways that can shift perception and encourage fresh insight into ourselves and others.

Art therapy is practiced with an array of populations, in many different settings, and by practitioners from a broad range of philosophical orientations. Art therapy from a positive psychology perspective capitalizes on the unique capacity of the creative process to increase positive emotions and improve mood, to promote empathy and build relationships, to induce engagement and flow, to illustrate and highlight strengths, to identify and create meaning, to heighten sense of mastery and accomplishment, to reduce stress, and to increase a sense of wellbeing and happiness.



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## 3 Good Things



List three good things that happened to you this morning (big or small). Think about *why* these things were good...what about you or the situation made you able to appreciate it?

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## Positive Art Therapy 10 Years In/What's Next? 50<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the American Art Therapy Association

Kansas City, Missouri  
Saturday, November 2, 2018  
4:30-5:20 AM

*Gioia Chilton, PhD, ATR-BC, LCPAT, CSAC*  
*The George Washington University*  
*Rebecca Wilkinson, MA, ATR-BC, LCPAT*  
*The George Washington University*

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## Positive Psychology and Art Therapy

### Positive Psychology— The Science of wellbeing

- Formally launched by Martin Seligman in 1999 (Seligman 1999)
- Psychology had focused so much on treating mental illness that it ignored strengths and resilience
- Shift focus to what makes life worth living and how we can flourish as humans (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000)

**Art Therapy**— human service profession promotes wellbeing through creative process & therapeutic relationship

- Artwork provides a universal form of communication we quickly perceive and understand.
- Doing artwork and seeing artwork affects the brain differently than other expressive/communication modalities
- Doing artwork is healing in and of itself.

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## Positive Art Therapy

### P Positive Emotions

- Happiness matters
- Positive emotions must be cultivated early in therapy
- Art
  - Induces positive emotions
  - Helps with recall and visualization of positive states
  - Facilitates externalization of all emotions
  - Simultaneously arouses & regulates powerful emotions both negative and positive

### E Engagement

- Building resilience, cultivating strengths, and mining for resources are more important than correcting for weakness
- Art
  - Highlights strengths
  - Reveals internal and external resources
  - Reveals hope and agency
- Flow and engagement are optimal states of human experience and should be cultivated
- Art
  - Promotes creativity and play
  - Induces engagement and flow

### R Relationships

- Positive emotions accelerate the therapeutic alliance
- Art
  - Accelerates therapeutic alliance
  - Facilitates communication & understanding
  - Promotes empathy

### M Meaning

- Posttraumatic growth and benefit finding is as critical, if not more so, than exploring history of trauma
- Art
  - Promotes self-awareness and identity development
  - Externalizes thoughts and feelings for exploration
  - Highlights meaning and purpose
  - Shifts perceptions
  - Fosters positive meaning and benefit finding

### A Accomplishment

- Art
  - Is literally accomplishment/something is made
  - Promotes agency and mastery
  - Inspires feelings pride
  - Provides a roadmap for treatment
  - Becomes a record of the therapeutic process

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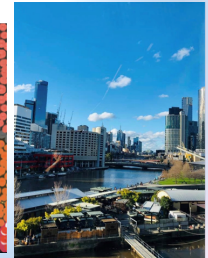
## Myths about Positive Psychology

- Implies that psychology-as-usual is “negative”
- Jumps too quickly to the positive
- Overlooks or minimizes suffering
- Maintains a naïve, Pollyanna view
- Ignores benefits of negative emotions or uncomfortable experiences
- Luxury that applies only to the high functioning/“working well”
- Only for clients who are stable, receptive, and self-initiating (Lazarus, 2003; Peterson, 2006, Diener, 2003).

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## Where is Positive Psychology Now?

Report from the 6th World Congress of the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA)  
Melbourne, Australia July 14-18<sup>th</sup>, 2019.  
Over 1600 delegates from over 60 countries!



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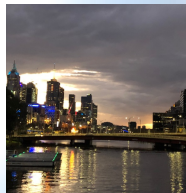
## Key take-aways from leaders in field



**Dr. Seligman:** Still amazing progress in the world across many domains despite the news--there is improving world health, wealth, education, infant mortality, IQ, democracies....

Learned optimism needed to boost innovation/creativity to address rising rates of depression, anxiety, effects of climate change

Interpersonal relationships matter



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## Dr. Fredrickson: from Positive Emotions to Positivity Resonance

**Known for:** *broaden-and-build theory* (1996, 2004). Positive emotions broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires, a process which in turn builds intellectual, physical, social and psychological resources for the future --positive emotions lead people to make new bonds and to develop optimism, goal orientation, leads to better health & wellbeing, longer lives, marriages, wealth, or social benefits.

**Key idea:** *Love 2.0: Positivity Resonance*--momentary increases in shared positive affect, attune and connect with another, mutual warmth, eye contact, mutual concern & respect, correlation between physiological states, feels energized and uplifted, “in sync.” Over time builds embodied rapport (we really “clicked”) social bonds, commitment, loyalty & trust.

**Current research shows:** More PR more leads to more enacting & experiencing spirituality, humility and altruism (Zhou, Fredrickson, in prep).

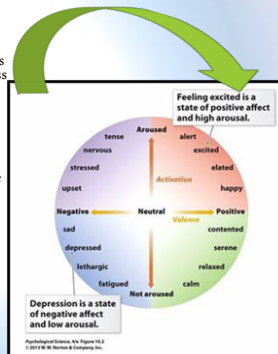


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## Dr. Pressman: The health benefits of positive affect (feeling happy) may be from *positive energy*

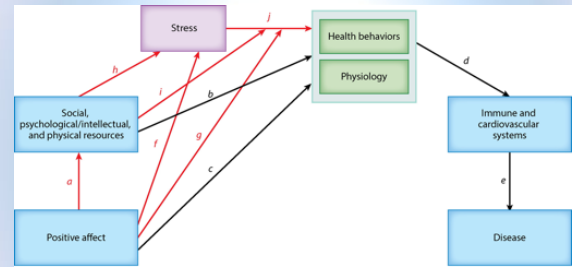
Sarah Pressman, University of California, Irvine

- Research examines the role that positive emotions and other positive factors play in influencing stress and health outcomes. Looks at physiological processes such as stress hormone reactivity, cardiovascular response, immune system change, & health behaviors like sleeping, exercise, leisure activities.
- Positive Affect (PA) impacts health outcomes like mortality, disease morbidity, disease severity, survival after disease diagnosis, pain, longer life, cardiovascular health, and better outcomes in chronic diseases like cancer and HIV
- Been measuring (PA) but perhaps we need more precise measurement tools to see the results of higher *activation* on the circumplex model of emotions—she links this with physical activity but has determined it is not *just* result of exercising, but of **positive energy**.



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## Dr. Pressman:



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## Dr. Lyubomirsky: Is it possible to become happier?...and if so, how?

It's true that your happiness is **HIGHLY** influenced by your genetics & life circumstances, but also by what you do! **Typical Happiness Interventions**

- ☐ Acts of kindness
- ☐ Gratitude letters
- ☐ Count your blessings
- ☐ Visualize your best possible future
- ☐ Savor & replay happy days
- ☐ Affirm your most important values
- ☐ Act more extroverted
- ☐ Recall an act of kindness to family & friends

**Her research shows these things matter:**

**Dosage:** kindness interventions work better in boosting your happiness if you do several acts of kindness in one day, not spread it out over the week.

**Type:** face to face interventions work better than on-line, video conferencing better than text..)

**Culture:** your culture & preferences will impact how well these interventions work.

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## Dr. Schaufeli: Positivity at Work



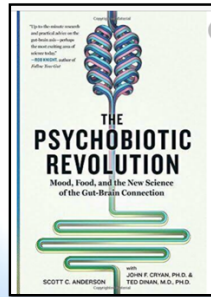
Higher employee engagement increases creativity, safety, productivity, profitability!

Work engagement is a positive, motivated state of fulfillment that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption  
—Schaufeli et al 2002

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### Also of interest...



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### and...Positive Art Therapy!



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### Where is Positive Art Therapy Now?

(a sampling of the booming literature)

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### New Directions

- Continue to integrate PP and AT
- New scholarship & research!
- Educate and partner with CATs and positive psychologists!

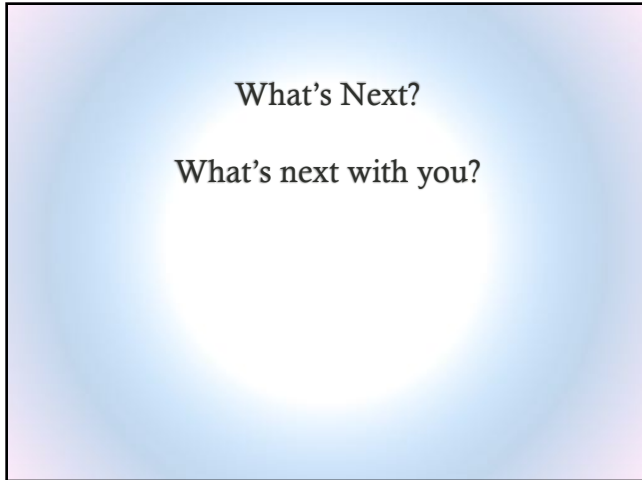


CATS at the APA Conference 2018



Exploring Flow, Meaning, and Jung with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

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**Stay in touch!**

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## **The Positive Art Therapy Manifesto: What Positive Psychology and Art Therapy Bring to Each Other Wilkinson & Chilton 2018**

Below we outline what positive psychology brings to art therapy and what art therapy uniquely adds to this blossoming friendship.

### **What Positive Psychology Brings to Art Therapy:**

Positive psychology can enhance the practice of art therapy by introducing key concepts such as:

- Positive psychology is not just for clients who are stable and high functioning, it can be applied with clients of all levels of abilities and disabilities;
- Positive psychology is not just for later stages of therapy when clients are stable, it can be employed at all stages of therapy;
- Positive psychology can be applied in any setting;
- Therapists would benefit from educating their clients around the factors that contribute to and also those that interfere with happiness and wellbeing;
- Therapists should receive more focused practice in their graduate training and internships on how to build the therapeutic alliance. This would include some of the following strategies:
  - Increasing positive emotions, such as feeling of connection, humor, and interest in the early stages of treatment. They help warm clients up to the therapy process, to the art-making process, and to sharing with others (therapist and/or other clients) by fostering the willingness to engage in behaviors which require effort and/or risk;
  - Providing opportunities for clients to identify what it would feel like if their lives were more satisfying and they were experiencing more wellbeing; exceptions when they have felt better; opportunities to attend to the good—to notice what is functional and working in their lives; to experience gratitude; to identify the positive motivations behind behaviors that may have become dysfunctional; and to recognize the strengths and resources that have helped them persevere;
  - Helping clients articulate and explore what happiness and wellbeing means to them also helps give them hope and promotes investment in the therapeutic process. This may be as important, if not more important, at the beginning of the therapy process as exploring their problems and bio-psychosocial histories;

- Acknowledging problems and trauma and alleviating suffering is critical in early stages of the therapy process and clients may need to talk about their history and struggles before they are able to focus on feeling better and before exploring their options. However we do not dwell there. Making problems and history of trauma the initial and primary focus of treatment is not always the most effective way of addressing and resolving difficulties, nor is it the most effective strategy for fostering investment in the therapy process and building the therapeutic alliance;
- We want to educate and empower our clients around the importance of positive emotions in their lives;
- The ratio of positive to negative emotions should be increased;
- Negative emotions have benefits that can be explored and then harnessed—they should be reduced but not eliminated and clients should be educated about their utility;
- Helping clients be mindful of and to regulate both positive and negative emotion is essential;
- We know that art therapy and art-making in general improves mood—when there is a positive focus or directive, positive mood is further elevated;
- Positive emotions help promote creativity;
- Engaging in creativity and employing strengths that energize us promote experiences of flow which are revitalizing and healing;
- Helping clients identify and develop their strengths and others' strengths produces positive emotions which help clients stay engaged in treatment;
- Clients are more likely to experience posttraumatic growth than posttraumatic stress as a result of the challenges they have faced;
- Increasing positive emotions, expanding creativity, experience flow, focusing on strengths, beliefs, worldviews, and meaning and purpose helps shift perceptions and promote posttraumatic growth;
- Shifting perceptions induces feelings of gratitude, appreciation, insight, improved relationships, feelings of empowerment, sense of possibility, and positive change which generates an upward spiral of psychological growth and resilience;
- We, as art therapists, can employ positive psychology tools to increase our wellbeing;
  - Exploring our *own* ideas about happiness and wellbeing;
  - Identifying the unique strengths, values, and beliefs, that bring *us* to art therapy;
  - Celebrating the unique strengths that art therapy brings to the mental health professions, to the art world, and the world in general;
  - Increasing happiness and wellbeing in our own lives;



- Developing strengths and behaviors that energize, revitalize and put us into flow;
- Creating sustainability in our work by engaging less in activities that deplete us;
- Partnering with others to manage weaknesses and accomplish activities that drain us;
- Finding what gives our lives passion, purpose, and meaning;
- Overcoming adversity and finding positive meaning in the hardships we have faced;
- Engaging in positive ethics to identify and differentiate the values that shape us personally and professionally as therapists and artists;
- Using supervision to explore *ethical dimensions* of our work, rather than waiting to address *ethical dilemmas*;
- Celebrating our pioneers, leaders, and organizations for the contributions they make toward maintaining and advancing the field of art therapy;
- Stepping outside of the art therapy field to collaborate with positive psychology researchers and researchers from other professions outside of the field who support the benefits of art therapy;
- Using our unique strengths to solve pressing social needs and help the institutions we work in, the field of art therapy, the communities we live in, and the world as a whole to flourish and thrive.

### **What Art Therapy Brings to Positive Psychology**

We believe art therapy contributes uniquely to promoting happiness and wellbeing by:

- Accelerating the therapeutic alliance by providing art materials and a place to create;
- Safely promoting affective engagement and feelings of connection through visual stimulation and manipulation of art supplies;
- Illustrating and visualizing positive states which further promote future-orientation, hope and optimistic thinking;
- Encouraging curiosity, creativity, play, and experimentation;
- Inducing the positive emotions (enjoyment, interest, amusement) that come from engaging in play behaviors;
- Fostering group cohesion through simultaneous participation in enjoyable artistic endeavors;
- Creating opportunities to enhance group cohesion through collaborative art-making (murals, mosaics, collective mandalas);
- Providing greater opportunities for flow through the use of appropriate media to optimize skill/challenge balance;

- Initiating the relaxation response through focused engagement and the experience of flow;
- Providing pro-social avenues for flow in group settings;
- Simultaneously arousing and providing opportunities to regulate strong emotions;
- Encouraging more complex and nuanced expression of thoughts and emotions, both positive and negative;
- Providing a highly efficient form of information processing by retrieving parts of consciousness, primary process content, implicit and explicit thoughts, feelings, and memories not accessible through other means;
- Creating a shortcut to communication by promoting uncensored *externalization* of internal processes and expression of that content—a message from the self to the self and from the self to others;
- Promoting awareness of thoughts and feelings (mindfulness);
- Providing distance from thoughts and feelings and thereby opportunities to reflect upon them more objectively;
- Uniquely showcasing and promoting awareness of multiple facets of the self that do not emerge through other verbal and behavioral modes;
  - Identity
  - Personality
  - Emotional sensitivity
  - Physical disposition
  - Beliefs
  - Worldviews
  - Memories
  - Values, passion, purpose and meaning in life
  - Personal strengths
  - Internal and external resources
  - Strengths in others with whom they are in relationship (inside and outside of therapy)
  - Interpersonal dynamics
  - Resilience—ways they have overcome adversity
  - Motivations
  - Aspirations
  - Explanatory styles of attribution (optimistic or pessimistic)
  - Growth or fixed mindset
  - Sense of agency
  - Beliefs about pathways to meet goals
  - Patterns of perception, cognitive biases, and insights
  - Beliefs that interfere with or contribute to happiness

- Experiencing a shift in perception upon seeing these aspects of the self represented through visual language that, however simple and/or primitive, is unique—a visual signature;
- Apprehending the separate visual elements simultaneously—the gestalt; seeing the representation of the self comprised of parts and yet, collectively, creating a unified whole (the sum is greater than the parts);
- Facilitating sophisticated exploration of meaning and perception as it relates to aspects of the self by comparing and contrasting the metaphors that emerge in:
  - the process of making the artwork
  - the visual elements
  - the intention behind the artwork
  - the verbal associations to it
- Fostering positive meaning, benefit-finding, and post-traumatic growth by revealing parts of the self, memory, and consciousness that are not available to recall or visualization through other channels;
- Changing “the story”; recreating narratives that include more empowered perceptions of experiences, especially those that were traumatic or involved loss;
- Cultivating optimism and “attending to the good” by providing greater opportunities to explore the nuances of and challenge negative beliefs;
- Increasing positivity (love, appreciation, gratitude, empathy, compassion, forgiveness) in relationships outside of therapy through illustrating interpersonal dynamics and strengths in their relationship that had not been evident before;
- Visualizing aspirations and developing more self-concordant goals by illustrating what is important and relevant in highly personalized visual language;
- Illustrating potential barriers;
- Providing opportunities to “virtually” explore and experiment with a range of possibilities and solutions;
- Illustrating where to most congruently channel resources;
- Literally accomplishing something—making art!
- Encouraging impulse control, skill-building, experimenting with novel behaviors, autonomy;
- Experiencing enhanced self-efficacy, pride, and mastery as a result;
- Providing a visible record of the therapeutic process;
- Revealing recurrent visual and metaphorical themes which reflect core aspects of the self;
- Identifying ongoing concerns, and areas which need more attention and additional resources;

- Giving clients an opportunity to review concrete evidence of their evolution in therapy; to observe consistencies and highlight change;
- Providing opportunities to “capitalize”—to celebrate progress;
- In groups, strengthening cohesion and fostering appreciation for others, strengths spotting, and empathy through seeing the artwork of other members and witnessing them explore the visual content and metaphors in their artwork;
- Providing therapists with opportunities to learn more about their clients and the intersubjective dynamic of the therapeutic alliance through making response art;
- Providing opportunities to deepen the therapeutic alliance through sharing response art and engaging in collaborative art-making with clients;
- Illustrating and promoting perception of broader elements of experience such as aesthetic beauty, spirituality, and finding the sacred in the mundane;
- Moving beyond and challenging the medical model’s reductionist focus on problems, symptoms, and diagnosis by providing information that is much richer and nuanced;
- Providing opportunities in supervision and consultation to reveal unique perspectives on all aspects of our work:
  - professional identity and career aspirations;
  - Relationships with client(s), colleagues, supervisors, work setting, and other institutions;
  - Ethical *dimensions* vs ethical *dilemmas*;
- Adding to the knowledge base on wellbeing through research strategies such as arts-based research that support our value but that are congruent our unique strengths;
- Building community and providing novel opportunities for social activism;
- Making the world more beautiful!

In the next section, we look at ways to apply these principles into the domains of PERMA and the practice of positive art therapy.