

## FOCUSING ON STRENGTHS AND OPTIMISM

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### Introduction

My primary purpose in writing this paper is to increase the reader's awareness regarding the considerable value of positive thoughts and positive emotions. This increased awareness is important because there is growing evidence that we are hurting ourselves by our lack of awareness about the value of focusing on the positive aspects of our community and ourselves.

However, before I go too far in the direction of focusing on how we are hurting ourselves, I need to recognize that I am attempting to elicit your fear that you are on an incorrect path. This fear-based approach is the very approach I want to discredit. This negative or fear-based approach is the approach that has been used since the beginning of the human species to warn people of impending danger to which they must respond by flight or fight. Instead, I want to make the case for approaching the future with a different perspective, one that focuses on the positive, on strengths, assets and the benefits of cooperative teamwork. Let me start this case with a few positive assertions: You, and those you care about, could:

1. be more productive at work and school
2. have better long-term health and live longer
3. be happier in a more authentic way
4. be more creative and more effective when solving problems
5. contribute more to your communities
6. have a better life

If I were making these assertions on your television screen, you would probably think I was speaking in an infomercial or at least as an advertiser for some new miracle drug. But no, I am not a snake oil salesman. I am simply making some assertions that are based on my reading of the theory and research literature in psychology, counseling, and organizational development. Let me give you some samples of the literature I am talking about.

### Theoretical and research literature supporting greater focus on *being positive*

In psychology, a movement called *positive psychology* has informed us of the benefits gained by focusing on well-being and health, rather than negative aspects such as distress and disease (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003). Chang (2001) has edited a comprehensive book, *Optimism and pessimism: Implications for theory, research, and practice*, which includes articles by many of the leading researchers in psychology. Three of those researchers, Scheier, Carver and Bridges (2001) tell us about the 'optimistic advantage' which:

.... is due to differences in the manner in which optimists and pessimists cope with the difficulties they confront. That is, optimists seem intent on facing problems head-on, taking active and constructive steps to solve their problems; pessimists are more likely to abandon their effort to attain their goals." (p. 210)

Optimism is marked by the extent that people focus on positive experiences and expectations. Carver & Scheier (1990) elaborate on this definition when they write: "Optimists, by definition, are people with favorable expectations about the future. Such expectations should make success on a given

problem seem more likely and should thereby promote continued problem-solving efforts, resulting in better outcomes.”

In his book, *The Optimistic Child*, Seligman (1995) extols the benefits of optimism, when he writes:

I have studied pessimism for the last twenty years, and in more than one thousand studies, involving more than half a million children and adults, pessimistic people do worse than optimistic people in three ways: First, they get depressed much more often. Second, they achieve less at school, on the job, and on the playing field than their talents augur. Third, their physical health is worse than that of optimists. So holding a pessimistic theory of the world may be the mark of sophistication, but it is a costly one. It is particularly damaging for a child, and if your child has already acquired pessimism, he is at risk for doing less well in school. He is at risk of greater problems of depression and anxiety. He may be at risk for worse physical health than he would have if he were an optimist. And worse, pessimism in a child can become a lifelong, self-fulfilling template for looking at setbacks and losses. The good news is that he can, with your help, learn optimism. (pp. 51-52)

During 1998, Seligman served as President of the American Psychological Association, which enabled him to lead, what some call, the *positive psychology* revolution. More recently, Seligman (2002) authored the book, *Authentic Happiness*, which makes a powerful case for what I am trying to say in this paper. This is especially so for the book's chapter 3, “Why bother to be happy?”

Scheier, et al (2001) when describing one of their research findings, write, “Optimists, as compared to pessimists, also tended to report being less focused on negative aspects of their experience - their distress emotions and physical symptoms.” (p. 202)

Optimism is not the only psychological construct studied by the psychological researchers who identify with the positive psychology movement. The construct of *hope* has also been studied extensively and its benefits have been substantiated. Snyder, et al. (2001) write “furthermore, individuals with higher levels of hope would be expected to have an enhanced sense of self-esteem both because of past successes and because of their beliefs that workable routes to future goal pursuits are likely.” Snyder and his co-authors go on to show how hope is correlated with psychological adjustment, achievement, problem solving, and coping with health-related concerns. A more complete description of the theory and research on *hope* can be found in Snyder's (2000) *Handbook of hope: theory, measures, & applications*.

A closely related branch of theory and research explores the value of *positive emotions*. Fredrickson (2000, 1998) describes what she calls her *broaden-and-build model* of positive emotions. Fredrickson explains the important differences between *positive emotions* (such as joy, interest, and contentment) and *negative emotions* (such as fear, anger, and sadness), as well as the effects of both emotions on a person's thoughts and actions. Fredrickson (2000) writes:

Negative emotions narrow a person's momentary thought-action repertoire. They do so by calling to mind and body the time-tested, ancestrally adaptive actions represented by specific actions tendencies. This effect is clearly adaptive in life-threatening situations that require quick action to survive. Because positive emotions are not linked to threats requiring quick action, an alternative model seems warranted: I have proposed that positive emotions broaden a person's momentary thought-action repertoire. (p. 4)

In this same award-winning article, Fredrickson goes on to show how positive emotions can loosen the hold that destructive negative emotions have on the mind and body. She writes: “Indeed, empirical studies have shown that contentment and joy speed recovery from the cardiovascular aftereffects of negative emotions.(p.1)” As the title of her article implies, Fredrickson (2000) recommends the cultivation of positive emotions to optimize health and well-being. She documents her implications by referring to a wide range of empirical evidence that supports specific predictions flowing

from her broaden-and-build model. She states that “positive emotions and related positive states have been linked to broadened scopes of attention, cognition and action and enhanced physical, intellectual and social resources (for a review, see Fredrickson, 1989). (p.6)” Fredrickson also highlights work of Alice Isen and her colleagues, who have demonstrated that positive emotions produce creativity, flexibility, and other outcomes that “enlarges the cognitive context.”

In the same article, Fredrickson cites Gottman (1998), who contends that happy couples are characterized by their surplus of positive sentiments that they have accumulated when they think about their partners. This accumulation of positive sentiments functions as a social resource when conflict arises. Gottman’s work demonstrates the benefits of positive emotions in close relationships, which has also been found in other settings such as in organizations where teamwork is important. For example, the website of *The Appreciative Inquiry Commons* (2003), provides several examples of how the focus on positive inquiry results in more effective teamwork and more productive organizations. Professor Robert Quinn, in his acclaimed book *Change the World*, writes: Appreciative Inquiry is currently revolutionizing the field of organizational development.” Appreciative Inquiry calls itself the *discipline of positive change*. The two founders of the Appreciative Inquiry movement (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1999) have edited a book whose title, *Appreciative management and leadership: The power of positive thought and action in organization*, communicates the primary theme of the movement. Appreciative Inquiry is about the coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. This movement is clearly grounded in the benefits of focusing on the positive. Although this movement is directed at the world of organizations and communities, it is very compatible with the movement in psychology called Positive Psychology.

The literature in counseling also includes books and articles about *optimization of behavior and wellness* (Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2001; Meyers, 1992; Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). This literature describes the value of focusing on the positive to improve motivation for success. Counselors have been focusing on wellness for several years, partly because the counseling profession needed a framework that distinguished its practitioners from the clinical psychology profession. However, being a younger and less powerful profession, counseling’s focus on wellness did not have as much impact on the national scene as the more recent “revolution in psychology” brought on by the Positive Psychology movement. Some of the literature in counseling also applies to the world of education, where the need for emphasis on positive thinking and feeling seems very evident.

### **The connection between human evolution and focusing on the positive**

I have presented excerpts of the theoretical and research literature supporting the focus on positive thoughts and positive emotions. I would like to cap off my sampling of the literature by citing a book that explores cultural evolution, Robert Wright’s (2000) *Nonzero: The logic of human destiny*. In this book, Wright makes a case that cultural evolution has been characterized by increasingly complex and positive interactions among members of the human species. Using key ideas from game theory, he argues that evolution has been occurring as humans move from models of “zero-sum” to “non-zero-sum.” Non-zero-sum models are characterized by cooperative interactions posited on positive motives and emotions. In other words, the hallmark of future societies will be vast webs of interdependence that are grounded on cooperative interactions and positive perspectives. Wright’s model for cultural evolution supports the principles of positive psychology and appreciative inquiry. If Wright is on the right track, his implications and conclusions provide a compelling rationale for focusing on positive thoughts and emotions. If this evolution continues, Wright thinks there will be opportunities for the long-term survival of the human species.

**The need for moderation and balance when considering a focus on the positive**

In the first part of this paper, I selected the literature that supports a focus on positive thoughts and emotions because I am trying to identify evidence that corroborates my personal experiences. After years of personal reflection and self-analysis, I have articulated my own strengths. I have come to the conclusion that my most potent strength is my optimism and my ability to focus on the positive. It is my judgment that I have been quite happy and successful in life, despite a background where I had few financial resources and rather poor educational resources through high school. I am also quite sure that I do not have superior cognitive abilities. So I attribute much of my good fortune in life to superior mental health, which I consider to be firmly based on my positive thoughts and emotions.

Given this predisposition to see real value in optimism, hope, and a positive perspective on my culture, and myself, I realize that I have to guard against misinterpreting the literature in this field. After all, my Ph.D. program in Psychology did teach me to look for personal bias and distortion in my perceptions and my conceptions. With this wariness in mind, let me acknowledge the need for balance and moderation when comparing and contrasting the focus on positive versus the focus on negative. As Fredrickson (2000) stated, negative emotions such as fear, anger and sadness, served the ancestral function of promoting survival. Similarly, negative thoughts may provide information that would be useful for people who focus too much on what they want to see. People who only notice what they want to see are often referred to as “Pollyanna” or “seeing things with rose colored glasses.” Such people have been called *naïve optimists*, and they often lack the ability to recognize their own biases.

To counteract tendencies towards naïve optimism, you can compare your perceptions and judgments with others that are observing the same situations. However, even this approach has its dangers. Oftentimes there are systematic biases in whole groups of people, reflecting a negative tilt in our society. This negative tilt might have been based on traditions handed down from people who started the traditions during times when the conditions were more threatening and dire.

As was mentioned earlier, Scheier, Carver and Bridges (2001) found that optimists, as identified in their studies, faced problems head-on, taking active and constructive steps to solve their problems, while pessimists were more likely to abandon their efforts to reach their goals. It may be that problem-solving is enhanced by enthusiasm and hopefulness. As Frederickson suggested, the process of experiencing negative emotions such as fear or sadness may narrow the person’s thought-action repertoire, which might result in poorer skills for creative problem solving. It is also possible that depressed people just have less energy for solving problems they are not expecting to solve successfully.

The well-known Serenity Prayer, popularized by Reinhold Niebuhr, but originally attributed to Friedrich Oetinger, may be useful for explaining why optimists seem to face problems more directly and try harder to solve them. The Serenity Prayer asks that:

God, grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
courage to change the things I can, and  
wisdom to know the difference.

Since optimists are more likely to expect things to work out, they are more likely to try to change things they think they can change. A pessimist would be less likely to expect success when trying to change things, and would more likely accept the things as being unchangeable. Of course it would get down to the wisdom the person demonstrated when evaluating the difference, but it is quite possible that a pessimistic or optimistic perspective would influence the wisdom to know what can be changed and what can not be changed. Again it is expected that naïve optimists would lack the wisdom to know something could not be changed. However, Aspinwall, Richter & Hoffman (2002) reviewed several studies designed to test if optimists can recognize things they cannot change. They found that the optimists identified by the instruments used, did not continue in their efforts to change situations when they have had low success during previous efforts. An analysis of several studies involving optimists, suggests that only a few of the people identified as optimists were naïve optimists who were unrealistic

about their abilities to change things. Most optimists are very realistic when deciding what can be changed.

It is obvious that the criteria for identifying *optimism* and *pessimism* are quite important, and that the use of the terms without careful instrumentation could lead to incorrect conclusions. Having said that, I have found that most of the research on optimism and hope supports the idea that there is a clear-cut optimist advantage. It should be recognized that in this research, optimism was measured with validated instruments, which were carefully developed.

### **How can people be influenced to focus on positive thoughts and emotions?**

Given the literature cited above and a supportive rationale, it is assumed that most readers will agree that there is an optimist advantage and that most people would benefit from focusing on positive thoughts and emotions. The next likely question would be: What are the best ways of influencing people to focus on the positive? Unfortunately, the answer is not easy. Seligman (1995) did offer guidelines for influencing children to be more optimistic, but studies showing success in these endeavors are neither numerous nor convincing. Most of the studies showing the advantages of optimism and hope do not include interventions where the positive perspectives were induced. We know with little doubt that optimism and hope are valuable qualities, but we do not have convincing evidence that optimism and hope can be taught.

However, during the past fifteen years I have had the good fortune of being involved in a project set up to encourage participants to articulate their *dependable strengths*. The Dependable Strengths Project (DSP) was established at the University of Washington in 1987. The ideas, experiences and the efforts of Bernard Haldane were crucial to the development of the DSP. I have served as the Director of this project since its inception. A paper describing the background and activities connected to the articulation of Dependable Strengths is available through ERIC/CASS (Boivin, Haldane, & Forster, In Press).

Although there is a lack of empirical evidence that optimism, hope and a more positive perspective can be taught or induced, my personal experiences with the process of Dependable Strengths Articulation (DSA) has shown me that people can be successfully encouraged to focus on their personal strengths. It is my belief that people who do a good job of articulating their strengths and then focusing on those strengths in their planning and their daily activities will become more optimistic. Their optimism will increase because they will be more focused on plans and activities where they will succeed. This will happen because they will be directing their attention to activities where they were successful in the past, the areas where they were using their best strengths. When articulating strengths using DSA, participants have to focus a lot of attention on the best experiences they can remember. It is reasonable to assume that by focusing their attention on their best experiences in their memories, they will elicit emotions that are more positive. They will also be focused on activities they had previously identified as being enjoyable and characterized by pride. These are the activities that elicit positive thoughts and emotions. If these activities can be increased and sustained in one's daily life, that person will be more focused on the positive aspects of his or her life. Thus I am saying, people who are focusing on the positive are likely to become more optimistic and hopeful.

Since 1993, more than twenty, five-day DSA workshops have prepared more than 400 practitioners for facilitating the articulation of Dependable Strengths by others. The training of these 400+ facilitators has subsequently provided opportunities for thousands of people to articulate their strengths using this particular approach. Evaluations of workshops nearly always show that workshop participants appreciate the opportunity to articulate their strengths. However, few rigorous outcome studies have been done to show how participation in DSA changes the behavior of participants. I did supervise some studies that showed significant changes in self-descriptions using the *Adjective Check List* (Forster, 1991). Yet, the experiences that have impacted me the most have come from observing people as they participate in DSA and talking to them after they complete the workshops. Although my experiences have not been documented by rigorous outcome studies, these many experiences have

convinced me that people benefit a good deal from the articulation of their Dependable Strengths. I strongly encourage youngsters and adults to articulate their strengths and then to focus on those strengths when making plans and carrying out those plans. A description of how high school students can be encouraged to articulate their strengths will soon be available through a chapter included in a book published by ERIC/CASS (Forster, In Press). If you are interested in learning more about these methods I recommend that you enroll in the training offered by the Center for Dependable Strengths (CDS). Information about the CDS and future training opportunities can be obtained from the following sources:

Center for Dependable Strengths  
c/o Highline Community College  
MS-Omni / PO Box 98000  
Des Moines, WA 98198-9800

Phone: 866.398.9474 (toll-free)  
Fax: 206.870.5915  
[ds@highline.edu](mailto:ds@highline.edu)  
[www.dependablestrengths.org](http://www.dependablestrengths.org)

If you are unable to enroll for a five-day training session, you might obtain the chapter mentioned above (Forster, In Press).

## **Conclusion**

Citing some of the literature on optimism, hope and positive emotions, I have attempted to build a case for increased focus on positive thoughts and emotions. If my thesis is valid, I see a great need for changes in many of the institutions that serve our society. For example, schools need curricula and personnel who can help students focus on their positive thoughts and emotions. If the research studies are valid, efforts in this type of education may have a far greater impact on the future success and happiness of students than many of the basic academic skills that are currently being measured in high stakes tests that determine the right to graduate.

Similarly, many religious institutions that focus on sin and fear of damnation are probably doing harm to the mental health of their members. Also, governmental institutions that provide for security and justice are building more jails and prisons to punish wrong doers and scare others so they don't break the laws. Where are preventative programs that encourage the development of positive behaviors? Where are the professionals who should know the benefits of optimism and hope?

And what about parents? How many parents make concerted efforts to help their children focus on the positive and articulate their strengths. How many parents help their children think of themselves in terms of their strengths? How many parents try to increase the positive emotions of their children by talking to them about their most treasured experiences? Why are there not parenting education programs that inform parents about the benefits of positive perspectives, optimism and hopefulness?

Yes, there is a great need for more knowledge and awareness about the optimist advantage and the great value of hopefulness. It is surprising that the theory and research on positive thoughts and emotions are not known and not practiced in our communities and public institutions.

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