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The Effects of Positivity on Health

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to investigate the benefits of positive thinking and how it can improve a person's mental, physical and social health. People who think positively believe they can overcome obstacles and have good results. Evidence shows that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) improves the mental health of patients. CBT helps patients refocus their negative thinking, which decreases anxiety and ultimately helps them be more positive; this increases patients' happiness and helps them to manage themselves better. Recent evidence published by the National Institute of Health showed that Buddhist monks can physically alter the neuroplasticity of their brain through meditation. Furthermore, Health Psychologist Kelly McGonigal takes a positive thinking approach in her TED Talk *How to make stress your friend*. She talks about the benefits gained when a person thinks that stress is positive and concludes that making stress your friend can improve a person's mental, physical and social health.

Keywords: Positive Thinking, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, CBT, Health

The Effects of Positivity on Health

Positivity is defined as “The practice of being or tendency to be positive or optimistic in attitude” (“Oxford”). Many believe that optimism and positivity “influence health-enhancing or health-promoting behavior through the coping styles” (Davidson & Prkachin 617) used by those who practice this in their daily lives. One form of therapy that teaches positive thinking techniques is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which is defined as a “type of talking therapy that involves exploring the ways in which early life experiences or critical events can affect the way that people think about themselves and others, how they feel, and how they cope” (Spain et al.). It can help people with mental health issues like aggression, anxiety, autism spectrum disorders, depression, bipolar disorder and many others. The emphasis is on teaching and supporting patients to develop a new way to think about and react to specific situations with a more positive approach and focus. Using positivity as the main focus to change a person’s reaction to their experiences has shown improvement on mental, physical and social wellbeing. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy “is based on the theory that your thoughts are responsible for your emotions and behaviors” (Albin). Positive thinking can improve a person’s mental, physical and social health.

Mental Effects of Positivity. The importance of positive thinking is clearly noted in a recent study on school children regarding the effect their attitude towards the task has on their math achievement. This study used a sample of 240 children and after accounting for many other cognitive-affective factors, it was found that “positive attitude toward math uniquely predicted math achievement” (Chen et al, 390). Behavioral studies have also shown that positive attitude can reduce anxiety and boost persistence and effort during learning (Chen et al, 391). While a lot

of the research has been specifically focused towards mathematics, it is believed that this easily translates to many other academic areas as well as personal areas of life. Positive thinking helps people cope better with their stress and disappointments; one study found that those who were optimistic “were more likely to focus on things they can do to resolve the situation” (Cherry) when they encountered a disappointment. Instead of focusing on their frustrations, they come up with a plan of action including how and when to ask others for advice or help. This is especially helpful when a person struggles with anxiety and is a great opportunity for CBT to come into play. CBT treatment for those dealing with anxiety “typically involves weighing up and testing out the accuracy of negative thoughts and beliefs, identifying more neutral explanations for the manifestation of autonomic symptoms, and trying new ways of managing and coping” (Spain et al.). One method used in CBT is meditation, which “refers to a broad variety of practices, ranging from techniques designed to promote relaxation to exercises performed with a more far-reaching goal such as a heightened sense of well-being” (Davidson & Lutz, 1). Meditation has been shown to have a positive impact on mental health as well as making physical changes to the brain.

Physical Effects of Positivity. A study conducted on the brains of Buddhist monks used brain scans to show that “over the course of meditating for tens of thousands of hours, the long-term practitioners had actually altered the structure and function of their brains” (Davidson & Lutz, 1). These changes are the result of neuroplasticity which is “a term used to describe the brain changes that occur in response to experience” (Davidson & Lutz, 1). This is a clear sign that using these skills to alter a person’s life experience, through the mindful practice of surrendering

the belief that they control the past or the future and acknowledging that the only thing that can be controlled is the present, makes tangible changes to the human brain.

Meditation is not the only thing that has been shown to make physical changes to the brain. Previously discussed research on the impact of positivity on educational goals showed that “in adults, greater curiosity and interest have been linked to increased responses in the ventral striatum and hippocampus, and self-perceived abilities have been linked with enhanced memory performance and increased engagement of the medial temporal lobe” (Chen et al, 391). These examples show that there is much more to be learned about the physical impact of positivity and leaves room for additional research on the subject.

This researcher recreated a famous experiment previously done by Dr. Emoto where rice was used to test for a tangible effect of words. Rice was boiled, separated into three sealed mason jars labeled neglect, anger, and love. These jars were placed in a controlled environment that maintained the same light exposure and temperature for all three jars. The neglect jar was left alone with no interaction from the researcher. Each day the anger jar was told negative words such as “I hate you,” “You’re nothing,” “You are stupid.” The love jar alternately was spoken to positively using words such as “I love you,” “You’re amazing,” “You are worth it.” After three weeks, findings showed that the neglected jar appeared to be half molded and half preserved. The hate jar was moldier than the neglected jar, and the love jar showed no signs of mold (Davis observation). This matched the results of Dr. Emoto’s previous experiment and indicates that positive and negative feelings and words have a deeper impact than is physically seen.

Health Psychologist, Kelly McGonigal, discusses the impact of a person’s perception of stress on how it physically affects their body. A study conducted at the University of Wisconsin followed 30,000 adults for 8 years. These participants were asked how much stress they

experience and whether they believe that stress is harmful to their health or not. People who reported that they had a lot of stress had a 43% increased risk of dying during that eight years, but only if they also believed that stress was harmful to their health.

However, those who reported a lot of stress but did not view it as harmful, had zero increased risk of death and actually had the lowest risk of death out of all the participants in this study.

This indicates that changing how a person thinks about stress can actually change their bodies physical response to stress. Learning to view the effects of stress as if they are preparing a person to meet the challenge and energizing their body rather than as a negative indicator of stress also has a clear physical impact. Stress can cause vasoconstriction which increases the risk of cardiovascular diseases, but when the participants viewed the stress response as helpful, their veins remained relaxed which decreases the risk of a stress related heart attack and other cardiovascular diseases (McGonigal). The stress response causes the body to release oxytocin which protects the cardiovascular system from the effects of stress. The heart has receptors for this hormone and it helps heart cells regenerate and heal from stress induced damage. McGonigal also states that the most underappreciated effect of the stress response is that “stress makes you social” and therefore a positive outlook on stress will also have positive effects on a person’s social health.

Social Effects of Positivity. The idea that stress makes a person social and that having a positive outlook on stress has physical benefits is important to consider when looking at the impact of positivity on a person’s health and well-being. As part of the stress response, oxytocin is released; “oxytocin is a neurohormone that fine tunes your brains social instincts and primes you to do things that strengthen close relationships” (McGonigal). Oxytocin makes people crave

physical contact, increases empathy and makes them more willing to help and support those they care about while also motivating them to seek support and to tell someone how they feel. It wants to help people notice when others around them need their support. Social contact and support enhance the effect that oxytocin has on helping strengthen and heal a person's heart.

Using CBT to treat social anxiety is another example of how positivity impacts social health. CBT has shown great success in treating a variety of anxiety disorders and helping people to be able to connect with others on a deeper level with less negative emotions and fear involved. Studies have shown that “those with social anxiety show distortions and biases in how they process social/evaluative information which leads to increases in anxiety” (Kaczurkin & Foa, 337). Using mindfulness to change those distortions and biases to a more positive outlook is the goal to increase the patients' happiness and help them to manage themselves better.

Conclusion. The effect of positivity on mental, physical and social health is undeniable. CBT, mindfulness and meditation are sure to play important roles in the future of healthcare. With studies like those done by Dr. Emoto and referred to by Kelly McGonigal, the healthcare profession is beginning to move towards a different approach on how to maintain mental, physical and social health using positivity. Combining these techniques with human connection will only further the impact that they make on a person's wellbeing. When one considers that 70% of the human body is made of water, and that positivity has such a profound effect on rice in the experiment previously discussed, it is important to consider the effect that those words and thoughts have on the human body.

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