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Overview of measurement-based positive psychiatry.

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Journal

Nordic journal of psychiatry, 72(6)

ISSN

0803-9488

Authors

Eglit, Graham ML Palmer, Barton W Jeste, Dilip V

Publication Date

2018-08-01

DOI

10.1080/08039488.2018.1459834

Peer reviewed



Nordic Journal of Psychiatry



ISSN: 0803-9488 (Print) 1502-4725 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ipsc20

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To cite this article: Graham M. L. Eglit, Barton W. Palmer & Dilip V. Jeste (2018) Overview of measurement-based positive psychiatry, Nordic Journal of Psychiatry, 72:6, 396-403, DOI: 10.1080/08039488.2018.1459834

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08039488.2018.1459834

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REVIEW ARTICLE



Overview of measurement-based positive psychiatry

Graham M. L. Eglit^{a,b}, Barton W. Palmer^{a,b,c} and Dilip V. Jeste^{a,b,d}

^aDepartment of Psychiatry, University of California San Diego, La Jolla, CA, USA; ^bSam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging, University of California San Diego, La Jolla, CA, USA; ^cVeterans Affairs San Diego Healthcare System, San Diego, CA, USA; ^dDepartment of Neurosciences, University of California San Diego, La Jolla, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

Background: Psychiatry has traditionally focused on studying psychopathology and treating mental illnesses to relieve symptoms and prevent relapse. Positive psychiatry seeks to expand the scope of psychiatry to broader aspects of mental health and well-being among individuals with or without mental illnesses. Positive psychosocial factors such as well-being, resilience, optimism, wisdom, and social support are central to positive psychiatry.

Aim: To summarize the emerging science of positive psychiatry, emphasizing the use of measures of positive characteristics and outcomes relevant to mental health.

Methods: Overview of recent research in positive psychiatry, focusing on measurements.

Results: Positive psychosocial factors are associated with better mental and physical health in diverse populations. Among individuals with serious mental illnesses, levels of these factors vary considerably, but positive psychiatry interventions can improve well-being and rates of recovery in at least subsets of the patients. A number of measures of positive factors and outcomes are available; most of them are based on self-reports, which have advantages as well as limitations.

Conclusions: Positive psychiatry has the potential to improve the health and well-being of individuals with or without mental illnesses. Further research is needed to provide clinicians and investigators with a full tool-box of validated measures for positive psychosocial factors and outcomes. These measures should be subjected to rigorous psychometric evaluation across populations to help clarify mechanisms underlying positive factors, evaluate their longitudinal trajectories, and examine the impact of interventions on health and well-being over the lifespan in different clinical groups.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 March 2018 Accepted 27 March 2018

KEYWORDS

Well-being; mental health; psychometrics; psychological resilience; optimism; wisdom; social engagement; depression

Introduction

Psychiatry has been traditionally defined as a branch of medicine dedicated to the study and treatment of mental illnesses [1]. Positive psychiatry seeks to broaden the focus to mental health in people with or without mental illnesses. A key requirement for any health-related field is that clinicians and researchers be equipped with psychometrically valid measures that can be used in a wide array of applied settings [2]. Not surprisingly, the most commonly employed measures in psychiatric practice and research involve quantification of symptoms of mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and psychosis. While these pursuits have advanced our understanding and treatment of psychiatric disorders, broader aspects of mental health and well-being have been largely overlooked.

In this article, we provide an overview of positive psychiatry followed by a summary of measures for positive outcomes and positive psychosocial factors. Next we discuss the needs and opportunities for overall research in positive psychiatry and then specifically for measurement-focused research in this arena.

Overview of positive psychiatry

Definition

Positive psychiatry is the science and practice of psychiatry, which aims to understand and promote well-being through the enhancement of positive psychosocial factors (e.g. resilience, optimism, wisdom, environmental support) that contribute to mental and physical health [1]. Positive psychiatry does not replace or compete with traditional psychiatry; rather, it complements traditional psychiatry by providing a more expansive understanding of mental wellness and opening up additional avenues for intervention. In the context of psychopharmacologic treatments, Bech has described a pharmacometric triangle, with one corner representing measures at symptom levels, a second corner representing assessment of medication side-effects, and a third one representing measurement of quality of life [3], with all three components receiving equal weight (an equilateral triangle).

Biology

As a branch of medicine, positive psychiatry seeks to elucidate biological underpinnings of positive psychological factors and outcomes. For example, individuals with low levels of resilience have been found to exhibit heightened activation in anterior insula in response to both aversive and neutral stimuli while individuals with high resilience exhibit heightened activation in anterior insula in response to aversive but not neutral stimuli, suggesting that resilient individuals appropriately marshal emotional resources to meet situational demands [4]. Optimism has been shown to involve increased activation in rostral anterior cingulate cortex and amygdala, and diminished activation in fusiform gyrus and frontal regions [5]. Putative neurocircuitry of wisdom, which has several components including empathy and compassion, involves the prefrontal cortex (especially ventromedial and dorsolateral), anterior cingulate, and limbic striatum [6,7].

Positive psychiatry and mental or physical illnesses

Positive psychiatry in serious mental illnesses (SMI) may sound oxymoronic. Yet, several recent studies have highlighted the previously under-recognized presence of positive psychosocial factors and outcomes in people with SMI. Relatively high levels of resilience, spirituality, and empathy were reported among individuals with bipolar disorder [8]. Individuals with first-episode psychosis were found to have levels of happiness and life satisfaction comparable to those in non-psychiatric individuals [9]. Studies have reported a wide range of levels (from very low to high) of happiness and life satisfaction in patients with chronic schizophrenia [10,11]. Higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction in people with schizophrenia were associated with greater optimism and personal mastery along with lower levels of perceived stress, depression, and amotivation [10,11]. Notably, these positive characteristics were also associated with healthier levels of biomarkers of inflammation and insulin resistance [12].

Among individuals with physical illnesses, resilience is associated with enhanced engagement in healthy behaviors related to self-care, treatment adherence, and exercise [13], and greater longevity [14]. HIV-infected individuals reported similar levels of ambition (but lower grit) as HIV-negative individuals. Greater ambition was associated with better global neurocognitive functioning, and higher grit with greater independence in daily functioning among HIV-infected individuals [15]. Older cancer survivors, despite worse physical health and more stressful life events, reported levels of life satisfaction comparable to healthy older adults [16]. Higher levels of optimism are associated with better outcomes related to cardiovascular health, cancer, pregnancy, pain, and longevity, due, in part, to better immune function [17] as well as greater engagement in physical activities and healthier dietary patterns [18]. Similarly, social engagement is associated with reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, healthier levels of biomarkers of immune function and inflammation [19,20], and greater longevity [21]. Higher levels of social support are associated with lower prevalence and severity of depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease, and greater longevity [22].

Therefore, positive psychosocial factors may serve as useful intervention targets to improve well-being and health among individuals with mental or physical illnesses.

Positive psychiatry interventions

In recent years, several studies of interventions aiming to promote health and well-being in individuals with mental illnesses have reported promising findings [23]. A group posipsychotherapy intervention in individuals with schizophrenia that included exercises to pursue a meaningful goal, reflection on own strengths, daily savoring of positive experiences, and brief mindfulness meditation, improved well-being, hope, savoring, self-esteem, and level of psychopathology after treatment and three months later [24]. A manualized intervention for schizophrenia, labeled cognitive behavioral social skills training (CBSST), aimed at challenging thoughts and misinterpretations of experiences to facilitate pursuit of patient-identified personally meaningful goals [25,26]. It improved cognitive insight, objectivity in reappraisal of psychotic symptoms, self-esteem, and life satisfaction, and reduced amotivation, anxiety, and depression [25,26]. There are also several reports of interventions targeting resilience, stress reduction, and compassion in people with or without mental illnesses [27-29]. In a randomized controlled trial (RCT) in patients with binge eating disorder, a 3-week self-compassion training and food planning intervention significantly improved self-compassion and eating disorder pathology compared to two control conditions [30]. A small study with a cross-over design reported that life review therapy, using structured questionnaires, in older veterans with PTSD, significantly increased self-assessed wisdom and decreased depressive symptoms [31].

It should be stressed that the intervention literature in positive psychiatry is limited and in need of additional research.

Measures of positive psychiatry outcomes

Relevant outcomes in positive psychiatry and commonly used quantitative measurement tools are considered below [1].

Well-being

A widely employed measure of physical and mental wellbeing is the Medical Outcomes Study - Short Form 36 (MOS-SF-36) Health Survey [32]. Bech et al. [33] have validated a 10-item version of World Health Organization European Regional Office (WHO/EURO) scale of Well-being, covering both negative (e.g. 'I feel downhearted and blue') and positive (e.g. 'I feel energetic, active or vigorous') aspects. A more recent version of the WHO scale is WHO-5 [34]. All of these are measures of hedonic well-being [35].

Flourishing

Flourishing is closely related to the concept of eudemonic well-being, and entails a broader understanding of what is involved in doing or being well [35]. At a minimum, flourishing involves the following five broad domains: (1) happiness and life satisfaction; (2) health, both mental and physical; (3) meaning and purpose; (4) character and virtue; and (5) close social relationships. Vanderweele proposed two brief, summary measures of flourishing [36].

Low level of perceived stress

Perceived stress refers to the extent to which an individual perceives that current demands or challenges exceed his/her ability to cope with them. An individual's perception of stress is a stronger predictor of health-related outcomes than the objective demands of a situation [37]. The 10-item Perceived Stress Scale [38], a modification of the original 14-item scale [37], is a widely used measure of this construct, which consists of two factors: level of perceived stress and coping ability/resilience [39,40].

Successful psychosocial aging

While traditional conceptualizations of successful aging have highlighted an absence of physical disease and disability [41], older adults themselves tend to emphasize subjective psychosocial aspects of aging. These include adapting to losses and limitations [42], maintaining social contacts [43], developing a realistic self-appraisal, and fostering self-growth [44]. Subjective successful aging has been assessed with a single item: 'How do you rate yourself on successful aging on a scale from 1 (the worst) to 10 (the best)?' [45–47].

Post-traumatic growth

Severely stressful events, including life-threatening traumas and illnesses, can lead to development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, a sizable minority of survivors experiences positive outcomes [48–50], referred to as posttraumatic growth [51]. A commonly used measure of this construct is the 21-item Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, which assesses five components: new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life [52].

Recovery in serious mental illnesses

Contrary to traditional conceptualizations of SMI as involving inevitably progressive functional declines, outcomes are heterogeneous, with a sizable proportion of individuals exhibiting psychological improvement in older years [53]. Definitions of recovery vary, but typically include an absence or a marked reduction of symptoms along with functional independence and higher subjective well-being [54]. This concept highlights the potential for individuals with SMI to lead meaningful, fulfilling lives with dignity and happiness [10]. Currently, there is

no single widely used measure that covers all of the relevant aspects of this broad but somewhat context-dependent construct.

Measures of positive psychosocial factors

Positive psychosocial factors constitute the main mechanisms that lead to the above-mentioned positive outcomes. The respective measures are discussed below.

Resilience

Resilience is the ability to recover from or adapt successfully to illness, stress, or other adverse events [55]. It is facilitated by positive-emotion-eliciting coping strategies such as positive reappraisal of adverse events [56], goal-directed problem-focused coping [57], and discovery of positive meaning [58]. A commonly used measure of resilience is the 25-item Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale [59] or its 10-item version [60]. Other measures include the Grit Scale [61], the Child and Youth Resilience Measure [62], and the Multidimensional Individual and Interpersonal Resilience Measure [63].

Optimism

Optimism refers to the dispositional tendency to expect good rather than bad outcomes [64]. Optimism plays a significant role in motivation and in response to stress and adversity [64]. Commonly administered measures of optimism include the Life Orientation Test – Revised [65], the Youth Life Orientation Test [66], and the Optimism-Pessimism Scale [67].

Personal mastery and coping self-efficacy

Personal mastery is defined as the extent to which a person believes that s/he has control over forces and events that influence that individual's life, and the personal expectations of being able to achieve desired outcomes [1,68]. It is an important protective factor against adverse effects of stress and illness [69]. The related concept of coping self-efficacy denotes one's appraised capability to respond to challenging, demanding, or threatening situations or events through use of specific coping strategies [70]. Personal mastery is commonly measured using the Personal Mastery Scale [71], and self-efficacy with the Self-Efficacy Scale [72] and the Coping Self-Efficacy Scale [73].

Social engagement

Social engagement refers to the quality and quantity of one's social network; key aspects include frequency of social contact, intimacy or closeness experienced in these social contacts, and pleasure derived from social interactions. Social engagement is measured with Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System (PROMIS) Satisfaction with Participation in Discretionary Social Activities scale [74].



Spirituality and religiosity

Spirituality may be described as the manner in which one's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors reflect a focus on transcendent topics such as belief in a higher power, meaning of life, and level of consciousness. Religiosity refers to an individual's participation in organized religious practices, and is thus more of a social phenomenon than the more internalized construct of spirituality. Relevant measures include the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality [75], the Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale [76], and the Ironson-Woods Spirituality/Religiousness Index [77].

Wisdom

Wisdom may be defined as a complex trait comprised of several specific components: social decision making, prosocial behaviors such as empathy and compassion, self-reflection, emotional regulation, acknowledgement of uncertainty, tolerance of diverse value systems, decisiveness, and sometimes, spirituality [5]. Wisdom can be measured using the Three Dimensional Wisdom Scale [78], or its 12-item short-version [79], the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale [80], or our most recently published San Diego Wisdom Scale (SD-WISE) which includes the above-mentioned content domains based on a putative neurobiological model of wisdom [81].

Positive environmental factors

Positive environmental factors also promote health and wellbeing. The most prominent factors are family dynamics and social support.

Family dynamics

This refers to the nature of interpersonal relationships among family members, including mutual expectations, and individual cognitions, emotions, and behaviors [82]. Family context characterized by greater levels of conflict and aggression, and cold, unsupportive, and neglectful relationships, are disruptive to psychosocial functioning, stress-response regulation, and increase the risk for poor health behaviors such as alcohol abuse [83]. Family dynamics can be measured with the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale [84], the Family Assessment Measure [85], and the Family Dynamics Measure II [86].

Social support

Social support involves the extent to which other people are available for emotional and physical support. Measures include the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support [87], the 35-item Duke Social Support Index [88] and its abbreviated 11-item version [89].

Needs and opportunities for overall research in positive psychiatry

1. In the few published studies on SMI, only selected positive factors (listed above) have been evaluated [8-12].

- Exploration of a full range of positive personality (e.g. creativity, courage, perseverance) and environmental (e.g. cultural ageism and other biases, societal wisdom) characteristics is needed to help increase the potential for use of positive psychiatry across a wider set of clinical populations and situations.
- Additional investigation is warranted to elucidate the precise bio-psycho-social mechanisms underlying positive psychosocial factors and their relationships to specific psychopathology. For instance, optimism reflects a tendency to expect positive outcomes, which may influence motivation and goal pursuit [64]. Motivational deficits are central to several psychiatric disorders including depression and schizophrenia, although the mechanisms underlying these deficits are complex and may vary across conditions [90]. It is unclear to what extent mechanisms underlying optimism and motivation overlap and impact each other in these disorders.
- Most of the published research in positive psychiatry has been cross-sectional. Given the availability of excellent national databases in countries such as the Scandinavian countries, the UK, and Canada, longitudinal investigations of clinical samples may be undertaken to examine possible causal impact of positive psychosocial factors on long-term health outcomes.
- In view of the promising findings of some intervention studies, additional research on positive psychiatry interventions is warranted. One aspect of this research should focus on matching patients to intervention type, based on the patients' psychological strengths - i.e. personalized (or precision) positive psychiatry.

Needs and opportunities for measurement-focused research in positive psychiatry

Use of validated measures for positive psychosocial factors and outcomes is critical for moving positive psychiatry from the lab into the clinic. There is a great need and room for further development of a full toolbox of validated quantitative measures for use in research and clinical applications of positive psychiatry. Below we discuss specific areas of emphasis.

Subjective measures: The existing measures in positive psychiatry are mostly subjective. Self-rated measures are frequently criticized as being biased. Social desirability bias, which posits that participants rate themselves more positively to present a favorable self-image, has two potential sources: conscious manipulation of one's image and subconscious belief in a positive self-image. Taylor et al. report that the problematic part of social desirability bias arises from conscious image management rather than from selfdeception [91]. In the study of SD-WISE, an image management measure did not correlate with three self-reported wisdom measures, supporting their validity [81]. Also, a large study using a published measure of social desirability found no significant association between social desirability and self-reported well-being [92]. A number of self-report measures have been found to be valuable. Notably, quality of life is subjective by definition [93]. Similarly, self-rated general health is a significant predictor of morbidity and mortality [94]. An investigation involving 1.3 million Americans found a highly significant correlation (r = 0.6, p < .001) between subjective well-being of residents of different communities (based on census report) and objective measures of wellness of the same communities (including cost of living, wages, employment rates, crime rates, etc.) [95]. Thus, the utility of self-rated measures should not be underestimated.

Nonetheless, measurement of subjective constructs must be guided by a strong theory and application of cutting-edge scale development and validation methodology. Fortunately, several scales for assessing traits such as wisdom meet these criteria [81]. For example, the SD-WISE used contemporary item-response and other scale development methods, with the content being based on a comprehensive literature review, expert consensus, and a neurobiological model of the components of wisdom. Empirical validation of the SD-WISE indicated strong psychometric properties, including high convergent and discriminant validity, as well as it having a brief administration time [81].

Thus, self-report measures have an important place in positive psychiatry, but their validity should be demonstrated in various population groups.

2. Objective measures: Development of objective measures of positive psychosocial characteristics and outcomes could enhance the precision and validity of the measurement of these constructs, potentially helping facilitate the discovery of underlying neurobiological mechanisms. However, there are few well-validated objective measures of positive factors and outcomes at the present time, as many of these are inherently subjective constructs. Creativity is needed in developing appropriate objective measures in positive psychiatry.

A possible model for objective evaluation in the field is a measure of everyday functioning – an outcome about which patients, family, and clinicians care deeply about. The traditional measures of everyday functioning are based on self-reports and/or reports from clinicians or collateral informants, but such methods are inherently subjective, being affected by the knowledge, insight, and objectivity of the respondent [96]. Investigators have developed objective measures of functional capacity wherein the subject is given a standardized functionally relevant task that can be administered in clinics or research laboratories. For example, the UCSD Performance-based Skills Assessment (UPSA) includes direct assessment of capacity to perform tasks of household chores, finance, communication, transportation, and planning recreational activities [97]. Through subsequent factor analyses, the UC San Diego investigators subsequently developed a brief two-domain (communication and finance) version (UPSA-B) that can be administered in 10-15 minutes [98], and has been widely used, including being translated and adapted into European, Spanish, Swedish, and Japanese versions, as well as a

- computerized/mobile version (UPSA-m) that can be administered through a mobile iPad rather than requiring the physical props and examiner materials from the original measure [15,96,99].
- Multimodal assessments: Given the limitations of both subjective and objective measures, a combination of the two would be optimal. Cloninger et al. have suggested integrating psychometric and neurobiological data to understand personality traits [100-102]. An interesting study of this type was a RCT of empathy- and compassion-training in young adult women. It included both clinical (rating scales) and neurobiological (fMRI socioaffective video task to analyze the effects on activation of relevant brain regions) outcomes. The training intervention significantly increased empathy and compassion on validated rating scales. Additionally, it enhanced brain activation in anterior insula and anterior midcingulate cortex, regions associated with empathy regarding pain, as well as in ventral striatum, anterior cingulate, and medial orbitofrontal cortex - regions identified in a putative wisdom neurocircuit [28].
- *Pragmatic/user-friendly assessment*: To facilitate wider-use of measures of positive psychiatric constructs, further developments are also warranted in terms of practical application. For example, continuous long-term observation of a person's behavior would seem desirable for assessing the levels of her/his psychosocial characteristics. However, there are practical and ethical issues involved in recording people's behavior in this manner. A useful strategy may be use of techniques such as ecological momentary assessment (EMA) and burst design, using smart phones and other technology [103,104]. These methods allow researchers to obtain multiple assessments at randomly selected intervals over a period of time, enabling more valid measures than the traditional single-time assessments at long intervals, while reducing a need for prolonged continued observation.

Another example of increasing the pragmatic usability of measures is the application of computerized adaptive testing. With computerized adaptive testing, a bank of items is created, and based on validated algorithms, only a subset of the most informative items for each respondent are selected - the computer 'adapts' the presentation in accord with the subject's responses to earlier items. This results in both a briefer administration time and a focus on the items that are most appropriate to discerning an individual's level on a particular construct [105]. This approach, grounded in contemporary item response methods, was successfully applied in the development of NIH Patient Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System (PROMIS) [106,107], and warrants exploration for measurements in positive psychiatry.

Conclusions

Positive psychiatry expands the scope of traditional psychiatry by broadening the focus to enhancing individuals'



positive psychosocial characteristics as a means to promote their recovery, well-being, and growth. These positive factors have historically been under-recognized among individuals with or at-risk for mental illnesses. As such, they represent promising areas to advance current understanding of mental health and wellness and to target therapeutically. A key to such advances and applications to clinical practice will be development of psychometrically strong measures of positive psychosocial factors and outcomes.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

This work was supported by National Institute of Mental Health, [5R01 MH094151-04,MH019934].

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