



POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY IN CRITICAL CARE

What is positive psychology?

Positive psychology is the scientific study of positive human functioning, or “what makes life worth living.” It is another side of psychology in comparison to other aspects which focus on mental illness. The modern “father” of positive psychology is Martin Seligman who suggested a PERMA model for factors which contributed to a well-lived or fulfilling life. These factors included:

P – Positive emotion – not simply happiness, but optimism, joy, satisfaction and similar subjective emotions.

E – Engagement – activities which fully immerse us in a state of “flow.” A long run for example, or listening to a moving piece of music.

R – Relationships – strong relationships with depth and intimacy.

M – Meaning – having and being aware of a broader purpose in life.

A – Accomplishments – having goals and achievements.

Una Harrington and the WRaP EM team have compiled some excellent resources relating to positive psychology. You can find them at:

<https://wrapcomau.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/positive-psychology-facilitator-guide1.pdf>

There are some exercises to consider regarding character strengths, a discussion of the links between positive emotions and health, and some further description of the PERMA model.

What positive psychology isn't

Positive psychology is a scientific field, not a self-help technique. It is a response to the sometimes ‘disease-centred’ models of modern psychology. It is the psychological practices of building strength rather than correcting weaknesses or repairing damage.

You can find more about the background from Seligman himself at:

https://www.ted.com/talks/martin_seligman_on_the_state_of_psychology.

He talks about the potential links between positive emotion, engagement, meaning and productivity. In a critical care context it makes sense that in stressful, high-stakes fields that time and energy need to be focused on psychological conditioning. These concepts lead to a discussion of performance psychology.

What is performance optimisation?

In a clinical context this may centre around our response to stress, or perception of threat. Elite athletes and other high-performance individuals have multiple strategies which enable them to perform under pressure or in stressful environments. Whilst the stressors themselves are often uncontrollable, our responses can be trained in order to become more effective.

The WRaP EM team also have an excellent summary of performance optimisation at:

<https://wrapcomau.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/performance-optimisation-e28093-the-synopsis.pdf>

One of the key distinctions that is made is the difference between threat and challenge i.e. whether there is a perception that resources are adequate or inadequate. Performance psychology involves the acquisition of skills via different psychological techniques in order to improve technical performance, whether that be in a cardiac arrest, a difficult line insertion or crisis management.

Here is an article summarizing some psychological skills for emergency care providers:

[https://www.annemergmed.com/article/S0196-0644\(17\)30314-1/pdf](https://www.annemergmed.com/article/S0196-0644(17)30314-1/pdf)

The article introduces some strategies such as: breathing, positive self-talk, visualisation and focus. The techniques themselves are not complex but are supported by an evidence base from medicine and other fields and may be highly effective.

There is also a talk by Jason Brooks on performance psychology in a medical context found here:

<https://intensivecarenetwork.com/performance-psychology-for-resuscitators-jason-brooks/>

He discusses techniques common to other high-performance fields, such as military officers or elite athletes, which may be useful in medicine. This includes consideration of self-suggestion and stress inoculation as ways of preparing for adversity.

Because there is so little current emphasis in critical care training on the areas of positive psychology and performance optimisation there is great potential for improvement. Though clinical skills and knowledge may be entirely adequate for daily work in critical care areas, the absence of a matching sound psychological skillset can impair performance markedly.

Although these are some brief ideas around the concepts of positive and performance psychology the areas themselves are vast. Hopefully these resources stimulate you on your own pathway and you can in turn add your thoughts and ideas.

References:

1. Seligman MEP, Rashid T, Parks AC. Positive psychotherapy. *Am Psychol.* 2006 Nov;61(8):774–88.
2. Lauria MJ, Gallo IA, Rush S, Brooks J, Spiegel R, Weingart SD. Psychological Skills to Improve Emergency Care Providers' Performance Under Stress. *Annals of emergency medicine.* 2017 Dec;70(6):884–90.