

# Positive Psychology and Mental Health: Solving Problems of Positive Psychology from A New Perspective

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**Abstract.** Positive psychology tries to help people find happiness, hope, and life satisfaction within people's lives. However, the approach of positive psychology might be inadequate. To reach all the positive sides, there need to be more negative sides to work with positive psychology because people may not have an accurate understanding of many mental disorders like obsessive-compulsive disorders or personality disorders. Telling them how problematic these mental disorders are might seem negative, but it will help people to have a better understanding of their own mental health. Forming the correct view of mental disorders will reduce stigma and help people with mental disorders reach out for help. Another problem with positive psychology is that many services related to this approach are driven by money, and the intentions might not be helpful for people who want to improve themselves. Possible causes of these problems might be related to the heavy money-related ideas led by Seligman, who is the most famous scientist in the area of positive psychology. Possible solutions might be related more to negative aspects of life in general because learning how to stay peaceful and happy during negative situations might be the only way to define true happiness. Based on the second wave of positive psychology, more attention is still needed to solve these problems by noticing how useful negative aspects of life are.

**Keywords:** Positive psychology, obsessive-compulsive disorders, mental health.

## 1. Introduction

Positive psychology has focused on people's hope, happiness, optimism, and life satisfaction for centuries [1]. However, this positive approach may not help people to understand mental disorders better. People form lots of false beliefs about mental disorders like obsessive-compulsive disorders and spread their mistakes even further through social media [2]. On the other hand, people also treat others who suffer from mental disorders negatively, and the stigma of being accused of their mental distress is very harmful [3]. With false beliefs and stigma, people with depressive or anxiety disorders will be less likely to reach out for help [3]. Therefore, teaching people to view their mental problems positively may seem compelling, but life satisfaction might be just a fantasy without looking at the negativity. Furthermore, some psychologists see the industry of positive psychology as money-driven and not based fully on science, even it should be, and this could be a possible cause of the problems listed. Mixing up negative aspects of mental disorders with positive psychology seems to be the key if people and therapists want to reach or help others to reach the goal of the well-being of life.

## 2. Method

The literature review was written using the UW-Madison library database. The entered terms are listed as follows: positive psychology, misunderstanding of obsessive-compulsive disorders, money-driven, personality disorder, male, female, and negative emotions. The criterion for including a study is that studies must (i) include references about positive psychology, (ii) include specific mental conditions related to positive psychology, (iii) peer-reviewed sessions, (iv) motivations of the studies, (v) some analysis about positive psychology or its problems. All empirical studies show data and specific mental diseases.

### 3. Literature Review

The primary purpose of this paper is to see positive psychology in a critical way by identifying some problems within the area of positive psychology, seeking the causes of these problems, and then listing possible ways of solving these problems. Without denying the reliability of the ultimate goals of positive psychology, this paper will give some possible advice about what scholars can do differently to accomplish these goals better.

#### 3.1. Brief Introduction About Positive Psychology

Positive psychology started with the idea of helping people with mental health problems be less miserable. Back in 1954, psychologist Maslow thought that psychology studies had successfully discovered how different mental disorders can cause miseries, but not so much on the positive sides [1]. He believed that people could be less likely to suffer from mental illnesses if they learn about their potential and how to see things in a positive way [1]. These thoughts helped to form positive psychology later. The approach of positive psychology focuses on finding hope, love, and happiness even when people are going through negative situations [1].

#### 3.2. Misunderstandings Cused By Insufficient Negativities

However, is psychology really that successful on the negative side? The answer might be yes when it comes to a scholarly view. Nowadays, psychologists are able to identify all kinds of mental disorders with DSM-V, but if the purpose is to help people and bring the most out of their lives, being too scholarly and successful might not be helpful. Not everyone is a researcher or psychologist. Normal people gain their knowledge mostly through social media instead of scientific scholars [2]. For example, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is one of the anxiety disorders. However, lots of people on social media use OCD to show how clean and organized they are [2]. If someone is being tidy and organized, this person does not have OCD. People who truly suffer from OCD are in pain and cannot live normally [1]. For example, they might need to check their door or wash their hands a hundred times a day because they are scared that terrible things will happen if they do not check things up very often [1].

To show more details about OCD and the widespread misunderstanding about this mental disorder, a researcher named Stahnke wrote about how people, even professionals, lack knowledge about this area. In her review, she first talked about how obsessive-compulsive disorder is one of the most severe mental disorders and needs to be accurately diagnosed [4]. OCD is related to lots of other mental disorders. Sufferers usually have thoughts or urgent obsessions. Everything related to this obsession they have is time-consuming, which means they spend at least an hour every day doing something and even turning off some areas of functioning [4]. However, despite how severe OCD is, it is also one of the most misdiagnosed mental disorders [4]. Some people, in fact, have OCD, but due to the former version of the DSM and the influence of social media, it remains untreated, and this might lead to other mental disorders such as depression or even suicidal attempts [4]. Maybe social media is not the only place people get misunderstood about OCD. Stahnke showed in her review that OCD was the tenth most disabling overall, but later, in 2017, OCD became the sixth most disabling mental disorder overall [4]. Stahnke thought these changes in data showed how, at a professional level, people still lack knowledge about OCD [4]. Moreover, personality disorders are also being misunderstood through the internet [5]. Many video creators link personality disorders with women [5]. It might be true that women tend to have a higher risk of getting personality disorders like bipolar disorders, which Wu mentioned in his study that among Internet-addicted college students, 341 out of 556 were women [6]. However, there are also studies by Cunningham showing that among veteran populations, 72% of males suffer from borderline personality disorder and even develop suicidal behaviors [7]. Therefore, something that should not be done is to discriminate against gender with a certain personality disorder. As a result of doing so, personality disorders seem to be a label of females and are often used as tools to lower the voices of females [5]. Therefore, if psychology is really that

successful at explaining negativity, then there should be no misunderstanding when it comes to mental disorders. However, that is not the case. Clearly, psychology needs to be more successful in the negative part so people can form a correct understanding of their mental problems.

### 3.3. Further Problems Related to Misunderstandings

Secondly, it is true that not all mental disorders are misunderstood by people, but cheering people with mental illnesses up is not as easy as what positive psychology tries to approach. One of the most important aspects of positive psychology is that humanistic psychology shares many themes and presuppositions with positive psychology, including aspects of self-fulfillment [8]. Something interesting about humanistic psychology is that it holds a belief in human perfectibility, and this had an influence on positive psychology later [1]. The idea of human perfectibility means perfection may be reached by human potential [8]. However, the belief in perfection will put lots of pressure on people. Mental ill will be treated as imperfect, and something must be fixed. It is true that people with mental problems need healing, but people with mental health problems usually suffer from stigma, which means that they are being hated by people around them [3]. Society also blamed people for being imperfect, which means suffering from mental health issues. This belief in human perfectibility will stop these people from seeking help [3]. Therefore, when people do not reach out for help when they are suffering from mental health issues, positive psychology might not be helpful.

Moreover, racial factors are also important to stigma. People from minority groups are more likely to be discriminated against and hesitant to use mental health services [3]. Mcspadden's research has shown that students at community colleges hold mistrust about mental health services because they are afraid that if they go to therapists, they will be seen as abnormal and people around them will avoid them and mistreat them [3]. On the other hand, students from minority groups are more likely to be mistreated because they are more likely to suffer from culturally based maltreatment like discrimination, and once they are discriminated against, depressive disorders will develop quickly, and these students will even develop suicidal attempts [3]. Therefore, through Mcspadden's research, it is a must for people to take this problem seriously because lots of people with urgent mental health problems are not reaching out for help [3].

Furthermore, these are also the reasons why the misunderstanding of personality disorders mentioned in the previous paragraph was widely spreading through social media. Among the small number of people with personality disorders who went to therapists, most patients are females, and that is why the misunderstanding could be allowed even by some psychologists, and most people nowadays think that personality disorders are linked closely with women [5]. Therefore, psychologists today still need to focus on the negative sides, even if it seems hopeless, but it is what must be done to bring the true positivity. If psychologists keep ignoring these negative factors, then preaching positive feelings like happiness, hope, and life satisfaction will be meaningless because people who need help will not seek it, and even if they seek it, they will not be helped because their specific pain is not understood.

### 3.4. Potential Cause of The Problems Within Positive Psychology

Positive psychology can be money-driven. Psychologists tend to sell their services as products, and positive psychology can be a great tool for that since it talks about positive emotions everyone is seeking for. Therefore, psychologists can use positive psychology as a powerful tool to attract clients, and people who want to hear a positive, loving speech will go to them. However, this will not solve any concrete problems. People still need to learn how to deal with their negative thoughts. Sarason pointed out some of these problems in clinical psychology before she retired from this industry [9]. In Dr. Wong's review of the book *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*, Dr. Wong made it very clear that this book writes more about the brand of positive psychology instead of how helpful positive psychology can be when it comes to lead people to help themselves to be more positive [10]. As a reviewer, Dr. Wong did not recommend this book as a textbook because it does not provide a scientific view of the study of psychology nor serves as a book, which people

can learn how to perform self-healing [8]. Moreover, as Wong mentioned in his review, this book might leave students with a wrong impression about scientific research [10]. Also, Wong thought that in the book, the author talks more about his megaprojects and personal experiences instead of guiding tools that might show people what to do when they are mentally ill [10]. However, Wong did acknowledge that this book worked well in popularizing the study of positive psychology, but the author seems more like a businessman instead of a therapist [10]. The author of the book is a famous scholar who studies positive psychology, Seligman. If his work is a brief representative of the whole positive psychology industry, then psychologists nowadays must question their understanding of positive psychology.

Furthermore, sometimes people need to be familiar with negative beforehand so they know what positive is. Just like to perform forgiveness, which is one of the greatest virtues one can perform, requires someone to do something terrible beforehand. Negative sides in psychology have been considered the dark side of psychology because they discuss negative emotions and negative characteristics. However, it can be used as a useful tool to make positive psychology more helpful. People need to make precise self-observation through negative ways to identify their problems. This can be backed up by research done by Ilies about how letting people be aware of their undesirable behaviors will create guilt in their hearts. With such guilt, they will be more likely to develop positive behaviors because they are more motivated to fix the problems they created [11]. In conclusion, maybe people with mental health do not need to feel guilty about their mental health condition, but being aware of their own mental disorders and how harmful they are will serve to reach a more positive side [11].

### **3.5. Possible Ways to Solve The Problems Within Positive Psychology**

Since negative characteristics of mental disorders can do the perfect job of telling people what is wrong with them, psychologists might want to see how useful these aspects within the negative sides are so that combining both the negative and positive psychology will help victims of mental problems more. Human nature is complicated and mixes up positive and negative behaviors. Therefore, to help people understand themselves better, psychology needs to focus on both free will and determinism to see both negative and positive sides of mental health conditions. Positive psychology's ultimate goal should not solely rely on exposing patients to positivity. Instead of telling the patients they are all doing great and they just need to focus on what makes them happy in life, psychologists also need to educate their patients about what are the mental health problems they are suffering from first and then seek possible solutions to these mental problems [11]. Since love, hope, and life satisfactions are all important for people to have a healthy mind, psychologists must focus on the problems themselves. Based on this new approach, instead of just selling counseling services as products and telling people what they want to hear, psychologists will be helping to reduce the risks of suffering from mental problems by letting their patients overcome their mental problems [11].

However, if we look at mental problems in this way, then they become challenges that can lead people to the positive side. Therefore, another direction that has been discussed is the second wave of positive psychology [11]. Based on Lomas and Ivtzan, critics of positive psychology claim that it is problematic to discriminate everything as positive or negative [12]. As was mentioned in the first part of this paragraph, sometimes negative characters can work with positive psychology and bring healing to people with mental disorders. Therefore, nothing can be fully negative or positive [12]. This critical view of positive psychology brought a second wave of reshaping the ideas of positive psychology. In their study, Lomas and Ivtzan presented seven case studies, and to show some examples of details about this second wave. Pessimism and positivism are completely different, but in this approach, these two opposite positions work together. To show these aspects of the second wave of positive psychology in detail, Wong thought that people should see their mental well-being in a positive-negative way [13]. In Wong's review, he kept talking about how the new view of positive psychology helped people to see that life is full of negative or evil things, and again, Wong criticized psychologists like Seligman for making psychology into a type of money-making business instead of

science [13]. Wong then sees these dark sides as positive things because once people learn how to overcome their sufferings, they will reach true happiness [13]. Also, learning how to find joy and peace in a tough situation is how someone truly enjoys life [13]. In all, there is a trend that more and more professionals think positive psychology is inadequate for people to reach happiness [14, 15]. At this point, mixing up negative and positive aspects seems to be a possible solution.

#### 4. Conclusion

There might be a necessity that positive psychology needs to consider how the negative sides of mental problems can help to reach the goal of healing people since, sometimes, only looking at the positive sides could be harmful. Love, happiness, hope, and life satisfaction require people to fully understand their mental problems and then go to professionals and seek help. Through research, identified problems such as common understandings about mental disorders, OCD, personality disorders, for example, and stigma is harmful and must be solved to bring positivity into people's lives. Therefore, finding the cause of these problems and then seeking possible solutions are necessary. Possible causes, like how positive psychology can be too money-driven sometimes, and possible solutions might be helpful to the study area of positive psychology. Moreover, there has been a new way of viewing positive psychology, which demonstrate that to be truly happy, people need to learn how to stay hopeful and enjoy their lives during hard times. To do that, it is necessary to bring negativity into positive psychology. Since positive psychology is based on the idea of helping people to reach the most out of their lives, positive psychologists nowadays should focus on the negative sides more to help them and their patients. In all, experiencing positive emotions will help people to improve their mental health, but sometimes negativity is needed to bring out the positivity.

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