Applications of Positive Psychology to Substance Use Disorder

Positive psychology (PP) is a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions. It strives to improve quality of life and prevent mental and physical illness that can arise when life appears depleting and overwhelming. PP centers on individuals possessing qualities and characteristics that can allow them to flourish in times of stress and in times of happiness. PP uses empirical research to determine factors and actions that lead to individual well-being, positive outlook, and thriving communities.

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PP treatment approaches are emerging around the world and expanding the conceptual framework in which addiction is treated. PP believes recovery can be understood as a function of moving toward a positive adaptation in life. Research in the treatment of addiction and PP widens our focus from reducing dysfunctional behaviors to creating meaningful and positive experiences that lead to a positive life.

Research shows that alcohol-dependent persons have an increased responsiveness to the affectivity of stress and alcohol craving. Positive affect (i.e., positive emotional state) is associated with lower stress and reduced alcohol craving, while negative affect (i.e., negative emotional state) is subsequently associated with higher alcohol craving. Therefore, individuals with alcohol dependence may increasingly benefit from cultivating more positive emotions in order to regulate responses to stress.

Varying Characteristics

PP research aims to identify specific characteristics that may be different between populations with substance use disorder and those who are not addicted. Krentzman (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of positive psychological applications to substance use, addiction, and recovery research. She found that people who abuse substances display lower levels of positive states and characteristics, such as hope, purpose in life, positive affect, and gratitude, than those who do not struggle with substance use disorder.

The constructs of hope and life purpose may be lacking in individuals who develop and continue to struggle with psychiatric symptoms and substance use. A small study found that hope significantly correlates with purpose in life and social support, and a lack of hope contributes to increased psychiatric symptoms among individuals with 6-months or more into recovery. Furthermore, regardless of the amount of alcohol or drug use, Ciarrocchi & Brelsford (2009) found parallels between purpose in life and positive affect with spiritual and religious practices and beliefs.

Some researchers have proposed that spirituality and social support may be underlying factors to positive substance use disorder outcomes. Though research on Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is limited because of the anonymity, one analysis indicates that strong affiliates of the program tend to display strong psychological benefits. Members of AA with at least 1 year of sobriety and a high score on an AA Affiliation Scale presented significant links to gratitude, optimism, spirituality, and purpose in life, regardless of length of sobriety.

A research study tested the impact of gratitude on positive affect and alcohol use. Individuals from an outpatient treatment setting who were diagnosed with alcohol use disorder (AUD) participated in a mixed-methods randomized control intervention for 14 days. Every day, participants were required to write three good things (TGT) that happened in a day and why...
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they happened. Data was collected by daily web surveys, followed by telephone or in-person interviews at the end of the intervention and at intervals postintervention. Immediately following the 14-day intervention, negative affect decreased while unactivated positive affect (e.g., feeling calm) increased significantly in the TGT group as compared to the control group. This study suggests that incorporating gratitude into those diagnosed with AUD may have a positive impact on recovery, and frequent moments of gratitude are beneficial for lasting recovery.7, 12

Character Strengths and Virtues in Recovery

Research on personal principles suggests that certain moral strengths might prevent pathology and increase resiliency to challenges in life.11 Moral strengths (called virtues) in positive psychology are positive traits originally identified by examining philosophical and religious traditions around the world related to moral behavior and the good life.4 These comprehensive virtues are: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, wisdom, and transcendence. Positive psychology studies these virtues in order to identify commonalities that act as strengths for prevention or recovery from alcohol and drug addiction.

One of the character strengths that may be especially helpful to enact in the recovery process from substance use disorder is grit. Substance use disorders are chronic conditions and require consistent and sustained effort to deal with lifelong adversities. Grit is the trait-level ability to be persistent and focused in the pursuit of long-term goals, which may promote sustained recovery.3, 16 Studies have shown that people with high levels of grit persevere through difficult tasks and obstacles in their attempt to reach long-term goals.3, 16

Interventions

Therapeutic modalities in PP (called positive psychotherapy, or PPT) are concerned with building personal strengths. In addiction treatment, PPT is a process of building a positive, satisfying, and affirming life in recovery.6 Specific PPT techniques are designed to further three components of happiness and recovery: positive emotion, engagement and flow, and meaning in life. Possessing these positive factors creates an opportunity to build a foundation for a successful life in recovery from alcoholism and other drug addiction.16

PPT attempts to amplify the intensity and duration of positive emotions about the past, present, and future. Engaging in life and finding flow means involvement and absorption in work, intimate relations, and leisure activities.13 Building a meaningful life brings a sense of satisfaction from belonging to or serving something bigger than oneself. Positive interventions by definition build pleasure, engagement, and meaning.

Building positive emotion, engagement, and meaning may actually counter mental health disorder itself. Tugade & Fredrickson (2004) found that positive emotions induced in the lab were related to more rapid dissipation of negative emotions and even reversed the cardiovascular aftereffects of negative emotion.16 A positive psychological intervention of clinically depressed patients in 1995 showed that positive emotion displayed counteractive effects to psychological disorders.5 Participants in a 15-week intervention study met weekly to read about and apply strategies for increasing their satisfaction in various domains of life. After the study concluded, psychological measures of the clinically depressed patients showed that more than half of them no longer met the diagnostic criteria of the disorder.5

Even simply talking about PPT components can promote recovery. A small sample of 10 at-risk adolescents with issues of substance misuse was given eight weekly interventions of group work and discussion around various principle themes of positive psychology (e.g., positive emotions, gratitude, optimism, strengths). Four survey measures were used to test subjective happiness, orientation to life, positive and negative affect, and alcohol dependence. There was an increase in subjective happiness, optimism, and positive emotions between the beginning and 14-weeks postintervention and a decrease in drinking behavior compared to the control group with no intervention.1 The positive intervention group showed an increase in happiness and a decrease in drinking behavior overall.1

References