

## Clinical Corner – Positive Psychology and Kids

BETHESDA, MD. -- Positive psychology techniques that aim to instill a sense of optimism halved the rate of depression in three studies of young adults and children that included as much as 10 years of follow-up, Martin Seligman, PhD, said at a meeting on preventing depression sponsored by the National Institutes of Health.

The goal of positive psychology is to enhance basic human strengths such as optimism, courage, honesty, self-understanding, and interpersonal skills, instead of focusing on "the broken things" and on repairing the damage of past traumas, said Dr. Seligman, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Positive psychology is meant to help the individual use inner resources as a buffer against setbacks in life and as a means to master adversity whenever it crops up, so that he or she does not sink into depression, he said. "It's not about how to heal; it's about how to have a great life," explained Dr. Seligman, who also is immediate past president of the American Psychological Association.

He and his associates developed an intervention that was designed to instill a sense of optimism, which they defined as a positive way of construing the failures and setbacks that normally occur in life. "If you think that failures are stable and pervasive -- that they'll last forever and undermine everything you try to do -- you'll get depressed. But if you can view them as temporary or affecting only a small part of your life, you won't get depressed," Dr. Seligman explained.

In a research project involving university students, Psychologists screened students using a questionnaire that measured the students' optimism. The students who scored the lowest for optimism were then randomly assigned either to no intervention or to a workshop that was designed to develop skills to boost their optimism. Principal among the skills taught in the workshop was the cognitive therapy approach known as "disputing." The students were taught to recognize their own negative thoughts about themselves and to argue against these thoughts as though they were disputing an external critic, Dr. Seligman said.

The 126 subjects who took part in the workshops and the 119 controls were then followed up for 8-10 years. During young adulthood, those who had participated in the positive psychology program when they were in college were half as likely to have episodes of moderate unipolar depression (13%) as were the control subjects (27%). Similarly, the subjects who had taken part in the workshops had half the rate of generalized anxiety disorders, compared with the controls, he said.

Dr. Seligman and his associates then studied 10- to 12-year-old children who had symptoms of mild depression. In this study, 67 children participated in a similar positive psychology intervention and 47 served as controls. After 2 years of follow-up, the rate of mild to moderate depression was twice as high among the controls (44%) as among the children who had participated in the intervention (22%).

In a third study, University of Pennsylvania researcher Dr. David Yu reported similar results after 3 months of follow-up of 10- to 12-year-olds in Beijing. He studied 104 children who underwent a positive intervention and 116 children who served as controls, he said.

Michael Sherman specializes in teaching Positive Psychology skills to adults and children.