Chapter 97
A Happier Balance:
Positive Interventions for Intentional Well-Being in Psychotherapy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how intentional well-being interventions integrate the development of character strengths and activation of positive emotional resources while reducing risks and alleviating symptoms of depression and poor health. The emergence of these interventions reaches back nearly half a century and each layer of development has led to a more robust platform for implementing these approaches. Now, based on the evidence-based principles of positive psychology, these positive interventions help to cultivate hope through a more balanced approach to well-being than traditional deficit-oriented methods of psychotherapy. This chapter looks at the history of development of these interventions and their likely next phase of development.

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

The history of psychology has been to create interventions and practices, which while alleviating suffering, did little to enhance well-being. However, not being depressed isn't the same as being happy, and the rich area of research initiated by positive psychology has enhanced our understanding of what it takes to feel good—and what intentional well-being interventions can do to help balance out the traditionally deficit-oriented methods of psychotherapy.

About fifty years ago, psychologists began developing evidence-based theories and practices about happiness that are now gaining momentum. From the human potential movement of the 1960s through the current proliferation of professional societies and discipline-specific journals and degree-granting programs, there has been a greater push for research on the effectiveness of positive interventions. In the nearly twenty years since positive psychology was labeled and formally initiated, a plethora of research from every corner of the world has been published in peer-reviewed journals.

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Martin Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association, made his 1998 presidential term a transformative platform for the development of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In its first 20 years, this new sub-field of psychology has become a highly comprehensive, evidence-based perspective (Seligman, 1992, 2002, 2011; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009; Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011). Through these contributions, Seligman promotes a science that gives well-being a prominent position. His goal is not to usurp the work of psychologists and psychology, but rather to add to the ever-increasing knowledge of human behavior. Seligman's work has been crucial in initiating change within the field. Prior to these advances, the goal of psychologists and other purveyors of psychotherapy has been to relieve the burden of emotional distress. However, this new research invites us to now include ways to promote sustainable well-being. Although the current practice of psychotherapy is significantly better than placebos, and in many instances better than medications (Castonguay, 2013; Leykin & DeRubeis, 2009), traditional psychotherapy can no longer be accepted as a sufficient treatment protocol. The need and research to support the effectiveness of these new interventions is at a tipping point. Positive interventions to promote intentional well-being are now necessary additions to the therapist's toolbox.

Seligman was influenced by and has built on the work of many pioneers who have come before him, and the contributions of some of his predecessors are particularly worth noting. Specifically, the work of humanistic psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow—both of whom also served as presidents of the American Psychological Association—stand out. Rogers and Maslow positioned psychology at the center of a major transition in society and became part of what was known as the human potential movement. At a time when the theories of Freud (1977) and Skinner (1972)—psychoanalysis and behaviorism, respectively—dominated the academic and clinical literature, Rogers and Maslow made a push for a more positive approach to individual therapy and to conceptualizations of human nature. Rogers's "client-centered therapy" (1951) helped psychology move away from the medical model and a disease orientation by promoting that psychologists refer to the people they work with as "clients" rather than "patients." Abraham Maslow (1954, 1962) theorized that people have a hierarchy of needs, and argued that as more basic needs (food, shelter) were satisfied, there would be a natural tendency to move toward full personal potential, which he called self-actualization. These two approaches reflected a departure from the psychoanalytic and behavioral models and were major influences on the culture. One important shortcoming of this "third way" proposed by Maslow and Rogers, however, is that although the human potential movement drew a very wide range of thinkers and followers, very few of them carried out evidence-based research on these emerging ideas. As a result, the humanistic theories did not have a substantial empirical base (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Despite this shortcoming, the work of Rogers and Maslow opened the way for other psychologists to develop alternatives to psychoanalysis and behaviorism. Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck are two of these psychologists. Both Ellis and Beck were trained in psychoanalysis, but found those methods to be unsatisfactory for many of their clients, particularly those struggling with depression. Albert Ellis (1962) had been writing about the ways humans think about situations and how our beliefs change as a result. He proposed the A-B-C model, designed to help understand beliefs that occur in response to life events and the resulting consequences. In this model, A = "Activating event," the thing that causes us to respond; B = "Beliefs" about the causes of the event; and C = "Consequences," emotional and behavioral results of these beliefs. There usually are direct connections between beliefs and consequences and there often are patterns in how these connections occur. The A-B-C model is important in the history of positive interventions because it made beliefs a subject for scientific study. Aaron Beck (Beck