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POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH CENTRE

Life Satisfaction, Virtue Ethics, and Character Strengths in Education

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Outline

- Subjective Well-Being
- Dual-Factor Model of Mental Health
- The Importance of Life Satisfaction
- Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotion
- Positive Psychology Interventions in Schools
- Virtue Ethics
- Strengths Gym



Subjective Well-Being

- Definition of happiness as being composed of both cognitive and emotional aspects
- Cognitive component = Life Satisfaction
- Emotional components = Positive and Negative Affect
- SWB = Life satisfaction + positive affect - negative affect
- Life satisfaction is the key indicator of happiness and well-being
 - Most stable component
 - Most commonly assessed indicator
- LS satisfaction is measured globally or across multiple domains (school, friends, family, self)



Why is Subjective Well-Being Important?

- Low levels of SWB associated with inferior outcomes for youth
 - ➔ Predicts low LS and extent of mental disorder later in life
- Positive SWB when fostered promotes and protects subsequent positive outcomes
 - ➔ Ensures well-being later in life
- Observed feelings (sadness, joy) not always a reflection of satisfaction with life
 - ➔ Low well-being often overlooked by negative indicators of illness
 - ➔ Mental health more than the absence of mental illness (i.e., 'symptom free')
- Dual-Factor Model of Mental Health
 - ➔ Assessment of positive indicators of wellness with traditional negative indicators of illness



Dual-Factor Model of Mental Health

Complete Mental Health:

- Mentally, physically healthy
- Well-adjusted, flourish emotionally
- Positive mental health, self-concept
- Academic, social success

Troubled:

- Distressed, poorest outcomes
- Host of social and personal problems
- Diminished social support

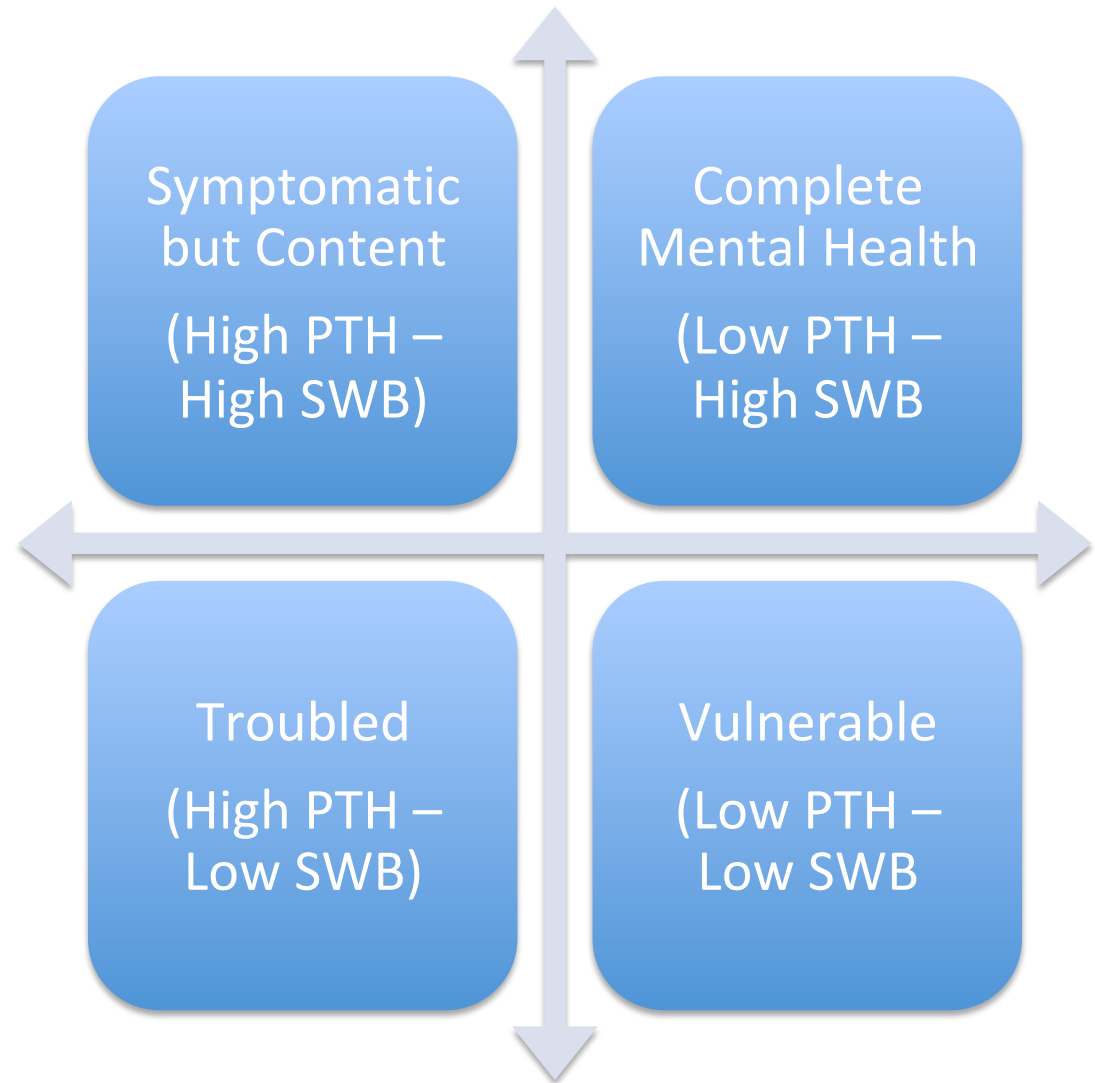
Symptomatic but Content:

- Ambivalent, internalised symptoms
- Externally maladjusted
- Functioning
- Overlooked by mental health models

Vulnerable:

- Dissatisfied, poor academic functioning
- At-risk, worse physical health
- Poor self-concept, social relationships
- Asymptomatic yet discontent

(Suldo, 2016)



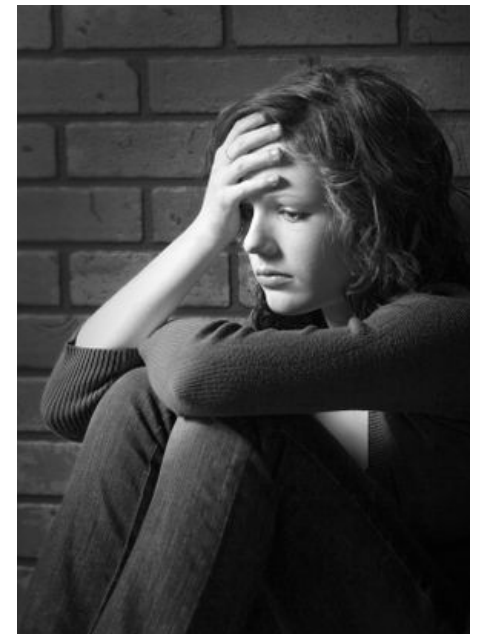
Youth Dissatisfaction

- Many young people are unhappy/dissatisfied
 - ➡ **Good Childhood Report (2017)** – 3 – 12% of children in the UK aged 10-17 are unhappy with their lives = + 1/2 million children with low well-being at any given time
- Well-being declines with onset of adolescence
 - ➡ 4% of children aged 8 with low well-being compared to 14% of adolescents aged 15 (*GCR, 2017*)
- Those benefiting from rich environmental and social resources do not necessarily display high levels of life satisfaction (*Proctor et al., 2009*)
- Unable to protect themselves from the negative effects of stress and the development of psychopathological problems



Impact of Stressful Life Events

- Presence of increased stressful life events related to increased levels of negative externalising (behaviour problems) and internalising (anxiety, depression) behaviour *(McKnight et al., 2002)*
- During development stressful life events predict later internalising and externalising behaviour and increased levels of mental disorder, which in turn predicts increased stressful life experiences (maladaptive cycle/spiral) *(Kim et al., 2003)*
- Frequent experiences of negative life events among adolescents is related to decreased perception of control over their lives, which in turn is related to decreased life satisfaction *(Ash & Huebner, 2001)*



Life Satisfaction a Protective Factor

➤ Life satisfaction as a protective factor:

- ➡ Those with high life satisfaction less likely to develop later externalising (delinquent, aggressive) behaviours following stressful life events 1 year later
 - ⇒ High LS protected students from developing problem behaviours in the face of stress (*Suldo & Huebner, 2004*)
- ➡ Impact of stressful life events on internalised behaviour is less significant for those with increased life satisfaction (*McKnight et al., 2002*)
- ➡ Longitudinal research demonstrates that student's levels of SWB predict later academic adjustment (*Lyons et al., 2013*)



Benefits of Life Satisfaction

- **Youth with extremely high levels of LS benefit from increased:**
 - ➔ Adaptive psychosocial functioning
 - ➔ Interpersonal and social functioning
 - ➔ Academic success
 - ➔ Positive behaviour
 - ➔ Over and above those with average levels of LS
- **Increased LS also associated with multiple school-related variables**
 - ➔ School satisfaction, teacher support, perceived academic achievement, competence, self-efficacy

Happiness is both an outcome and a cause of diverse positive outcomes: Success makes people happy. Happy people are more successful. *(Lyubomirsky et al., 2005)*



Correlates of Life Satisfaction

Positive

- Extraversion/Social Self-Efficacy
- Self-Esteem
- Interpersonal Relations
- Exercise/SEAs/Health
- Academic Achievement
- Intrinsic Values/Goals
- Social/Parental Support
- Character Strengths
 - Hope
 - Love
 - Gratitude
 - Enthusiasm



Negative

- Neuroticism
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Substance Use/Abuse
- Extrinsic Values/Goals
- Violence
- Loneliness – positively correlated with:
 - State anxiety
 - Social anxiety
 - Depression
 - Public Self-Consciousness



Correlates of Life Satisfaction

➤ **Self-Efficacy** – personal belief in what one can do, or is capable of doing

➡ One of the most consistent predictors of life satisfaction

➤ **Hope** – perception that one can formulate strategies towards and reach desired goals



➡ Adolescent levels of hope positively associated with personal adjustment, GPA, and SEAs (negatively associated to substance abuse and behaviour problems)

➡ Those with high hope have greater LS following stressful life events than those with low hope

➤ **Locus of Control** – the extent to which individuals believe they can control events that effect them

➡ Internal – based on own behaviour

➡ External – luck, chance, powerful others

➡ Frequent experiences of negative life events among adolescents is related to decreased perception of control over their lives, which in turn is related to decreased life satisfaction (Ash & Huebner, 2001)



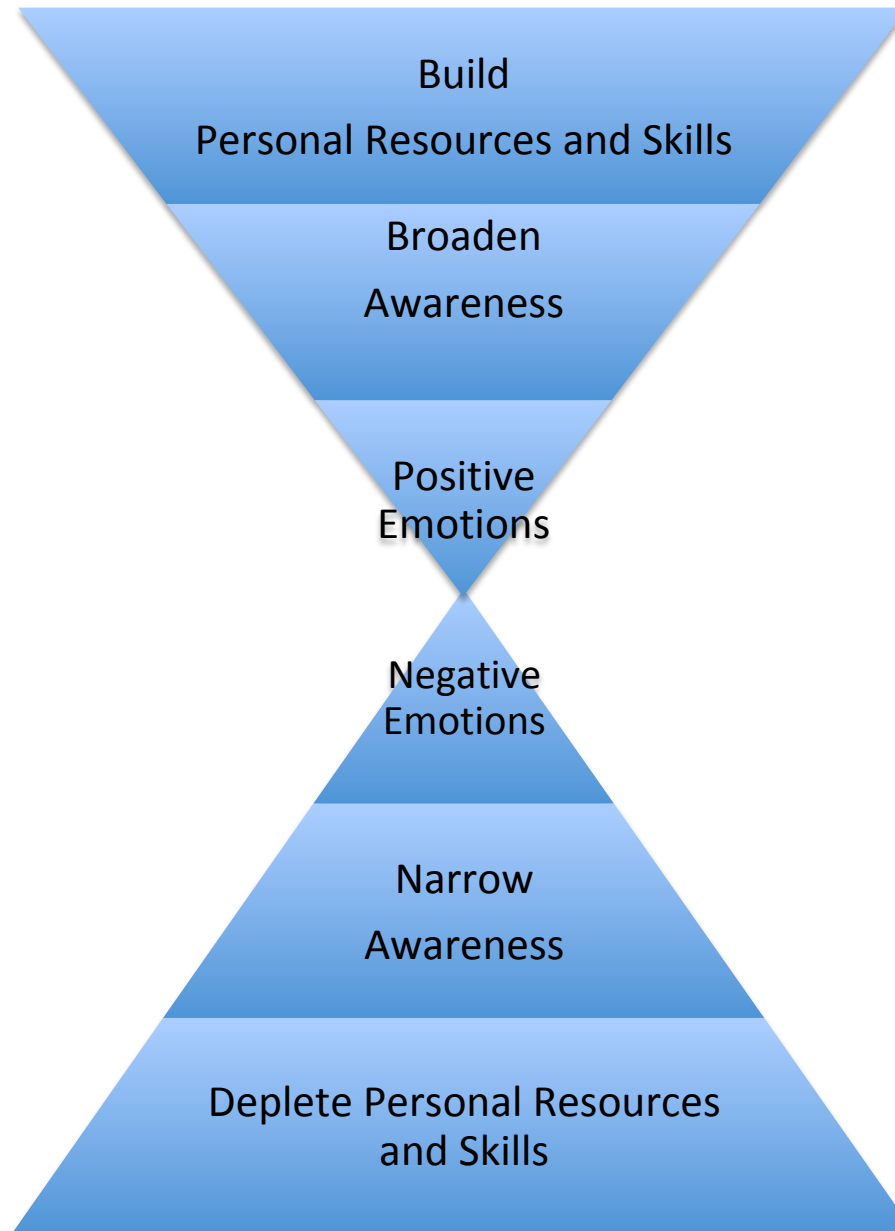
Positive Emotions

- Positive emotions are an essential component of SWB (LS + PA)
- Scientific research on neuroplasticity suggests that positive emotional states may trigger lasting durable changes in the structure and function of the brain *(Garland et al., 2010)*
- Positive emotions need to outweigh negative emotions 3 to 1



Barbara Fredrickson (2001) – Broaden-and- Build Theory of Positive Emotions

- Positive emotions (love, joy, contentment) broaden awareness and momentary thought processes and behaviours (creativity, exploration, interest), which over time build personal, social, and psychological resources and skills
- Momentary experiences of emotions may build into self-perpetuating emotional systems producing lasting affective dispositions (*Garland et al., 2010*)
- Negative emotions (sadness, anxiety, fear) narrow awareness and momentary thought process and behaviours (fight-or-flight, escape, attack)



Positive Psychology Interventions

- Practitioners can apply targeted activities to increase/foster subjective well-being
- In line with proactive, resource building approach to mental health services
- Are *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*
- National education strategies tend to be prescriptive
 - ➔ Focus on informing students what to do and what not to do (Park & Peterson, 2009)
 - ➔ Fail to foster good character through practicing and modelling behaviour
- Applied Positive Psychology Interventions (PPI)
 - ➔ Single component PPIs
 - ◇ Focus on one key positive psychology concept (e.g., gratitude, hope, mindfulness, kindness, forgiveness)
 - ➔ Multi-component PPIs
 - ◇ Integrate several positive psychology concepts (e.g., *Strengths Gym*, *Amazing Me*)



School - The Ideal Place?

- Schools are the ideal place for well-being initiatives
- Most young people spend the majority of their week-day in school
- Most day-to-day interactions experienced at school will impact their well-being



(Seligman et al., 2009)



School Interventions?

➤ **Well-being should be taught in school!** *(Seligman et al., 2009)*

- ➡ **More well-being is synergistic with better learning**
- ➡ **Parents want more for their children than just the avoidance of negative behaviours**
 - **They want their children to flourish in all domains of life** *(Moore & Lippman, 2005)*
- ➡ **Flourishing:**
 - **To be filled with positive emotion and to be functioning well psychologically and socially** *(Keyes, 2002)*



Most People are Happy

- Understanding what enables most people to be happy aids us in designing interventions to help those who are languishing
 - ➔ E.g., If only 10% of the US population are unhappy, there are 35 million unhappy individuals in the country
- Vital to understand how to lift those who are languishing to a more optimal state of functioning (*Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009*)



Positive Youth Development

- **Positive youth development**
 - ➡ Build strength to buffer against the development of problems
- **Must protect those with positive levels of happiness from diminishing** (*Proctor et al., 2009*)



Virtues & Character Strengths

- **Virtue** – moral excellence
 - ➔ Trait or quality deemed to be morally good and valued as such
- **Character Strengths** – expression of virtue
 - ➔ Processes or mechanisms that define virtues
- **VIA** – six broad (*ubiquitous*) virtues
 - ➔ Wisdom and knowledge
 - ➔ Courage
 - ➔ Humanity
 - ➔ Justice
 - ➔ Temperance
 - ➔ Transcendence
- **24 Character Strengths**

A word cloud of 24 character strengths arranged in a circular pattern. The words are: Persistence, Social Skills, Love of Learning, Open-Mindedness, Leadership, Kindness, Gratitude, Prudence, Humour, Hope, Honesty, Modesty, Love, Teamwork, Self-Control, Persistence, Forgiveness, Creativity, Enthusiasm, Curiosity, Love of Beauty, Wisdom, Courage, and Fairness. The words are in various colors and sizes, with 'Wisdom' and 'Courage' being the largest.



Virtue Ethics: Links with PP

- Virtue ethics is concerned with the ‘good life’ and what kinds of ‘persons we should be’
- ‘What is the right action?’ is an entirely different question from ‘How should I live?’
- Character is about a state of being
 - ➡ Character is also about *doing*
 - ➡ **Positive psychology is not a spectator sport** (Peterson, 2006)
- Character develops over a long period of time
 - ➡ We are born with all sorts of natural tendencies (i.e., positive and negative) – this is our ‘raw material’
 - ➡ Natural tendencies can be encouraged and developed or discouraged and thwarted during development
 - ➡ Character strengths are not ‘grounded in immutable biogenetic characteristics’ (Peterson, 2006, p. 139)

(Athanassoulis, 2016; Sachs, 2016)



Virtue Ethics: Moral Education

- Moral education and development is a major part of virtue ethics – habituation into virtue
 - ➡ If not fostered strengths may be lost over the course of development (*Peterson, 2006*)
 - ➡ Traits need to be nurtured
 - ➡ Once established become stable/reliable – a person with a certain character can be relied upon (within reason) to act consistently over time
- True virtue requires choice, understanding, and knowledge
 - ➡ **Virtue is chosen knowingly for its own sake**
 - ➡ This is what constitutes *character*
 - ➡ Not the result of ‘conditioning’
 - ➡ ‘**Lies in a mean**’ – felt at the right time, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way (*Aristotle, c. 330 BCE/1925, p. 38-39*)
 - ➡ Determined by *practical wisdom*



(*Athanassoulis, 2016; Sachs, 2016*)

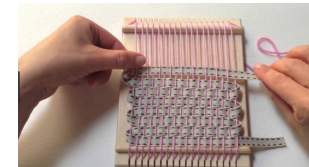
Call for a Return to Virtue

- The exercising of virtue provides meaning to being and thus is our ultimate function
- Virtue ethics suggest making a *'lifestyle'* choice
 - ➔ Adopt a way of being, such that we become our choices
- By choosing to practice virtue, we become by nature the very thing that we strive for – actualise our being
- We must practice virtue to become virtuous – making virtuous characteristics/virtuous dispositions our own



Weaving in Virtue Ethics

- Goals for change
- Wisdom exercises – imagined future self
 - ➔ Begin to make changes in the their lives **now** that will enable them to live more in accordance with their values and reach their desired tomorrow – reduction of **moral dissonance**
- Exploring the relationship with the self
 - ➔ Self-love, forgiveness, kindness, justice
- What does living in accordance with core values **look like** for them?
 - ➔ What does the good life look like?
- Teachers can weave virtue ethics into practice simply by being attuned to opportunities that afford them ability to open up and explore virtue ethical themes, such as character strengths and virtues



Strengths Gym: Beginnings

- How best to measure 'well-being' among young people?
 - ➔ Huebner – Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (*Huebner, 1991*)
- Life satisfaction (LS) a key existential variable
 - ➔ Positive psychology – LS an indicator of happiness
- Adult research findings
 - ➔ Building character strengths (i.e., virtues) through strengths-based exercises increases LS and well-being (*Seligman et al., 2005*)



Psychological wealth includes life satisfaction, the feeling that life is full of meaning, a sense of engagement in interesting activities, the pursuit of important goals, the experience of positive emotional feelings, and a sense of spirituality that connects people to things larger than themselves.

— Ed Diener —



Review of the Life Satisfaction Literature

➤ Review of LS literature

(C.L. Proctor et al., 2009)

- Extensive and broad based literature revealed
- 141 empirical studies reviewed
- LS an important outcome variable and influential predictor of positive psychological well-being
- LS acts as a buffer against negative effects of stress

(Suldo & Huebner, 2004)



Could strengths-based exercises serve as the means to increase LS among young people in the school environment?



Strengths Gym

- **Based on the VIA strengths**
 - ➔ 24 lessons
- **Flexible curriculum:**
 - ➔ Strengths exercises
 - ➔ In-class activities
 - ➔ Philosophical discussion
 - ➔ Stories
 - ➔ Real-world homework activities



Strengths Gym

- Three stage learning process:
 - General understanding of strengths and development of *strengths vocabulary*
 - Identification and own use of strengths
 - Recognition and identification of use of strengths by others
- All exercises can be completed solitarily or in groups



Strengths Gym - Students

- Students self-identify with their signature strengths at the beginning and end of each level
 - ➔ Re-evaluate strengths before moving on
- Strengths Builder themes:
 - ➔ Year 7 – Design a Superhero
 - ➔ Year 8 – Strength in Action Story
 - ➔ Year 9 – Create Your Own Strength in Action Story
 - ➔ Additional item to further develop use of the strength
- Strengths Challenge:
 - ➔ Real-world homework

Love of Beauty

Love of Beauty means:

You notice and love beautiful things, in nature, art, music, or people.



Strengths Builders:

1. Strength in Action Story – Can you remember a time when you or somebody you know truly showed their Love of Beauty? Write or draw or tell a story of Love of Beauty in action.
2. Animal Beauty Contest – Which animals do you consider beautiful? Why? Work with some friends to collect different examples of beautiful animals and then see if you can put them in order of beauty. Which is the most beautiful, which one comes next? Compare your list with another group.

Strengths Challenge:

Look for beauty on your way to school. Tell a friend or family member what you noticed.

Strengths Notes:



(Proctor & Fox Eades, 2011)

Strengths Gym - Teachers

- **Menu format lesson plans**
 - Choose activities that suit needs
 - Variety of activities
- **Strengths sessions:**
 - Introduction to strength
 - Key features
 - Definition
 - Benefits
 - Famous quotes
 - Thinking questions
 - Closing activities
 - Display suggestions
 - Links to PSHE curriculum
 - Strengths story
 - Opportunities to build across the curriculum
 - Positive education



(Proctor & Fox Eades, 2011)

Principles Behind Strengths Gym

- **Strengths-spotting is a skill that can be learned**
 - ➡ Students become more aware of strengths in themselves, in other people, and in the world around them; it's ok to be different
- **Strengths can be improved**
 - ➡ The more we practice and use a strength the more we have of it
- **We get more of what we focus on**
 - ➡ Paying attention to a subject primes us to notice it; thinking about kindness makes us more likely to do kind things



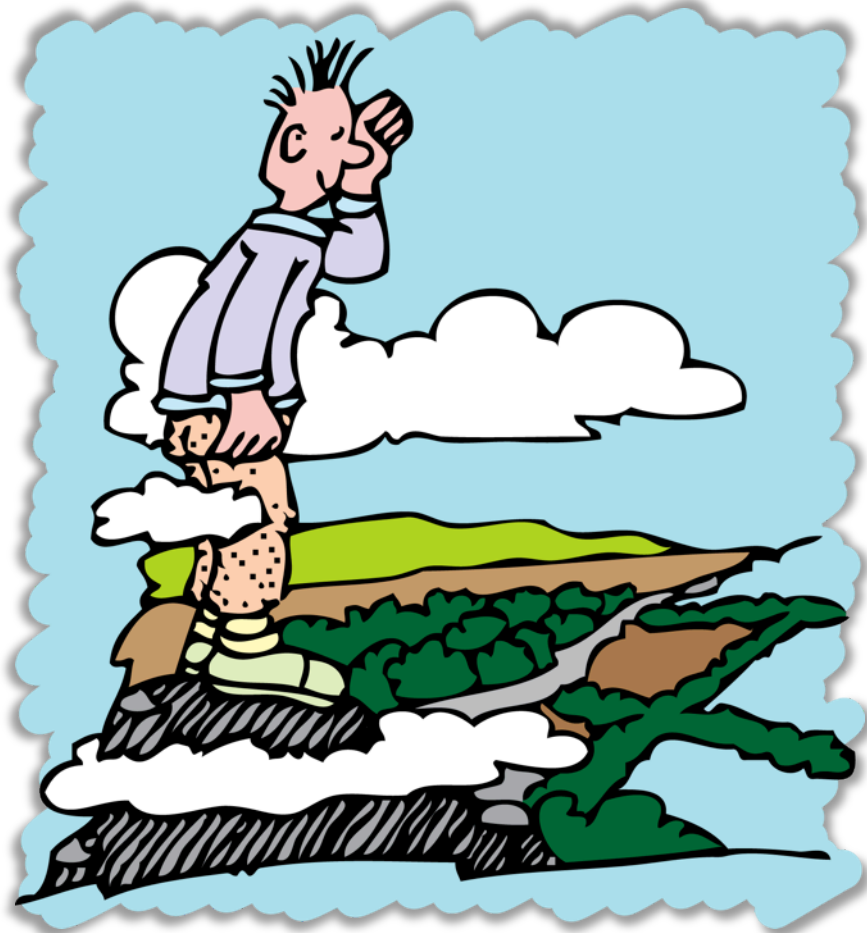
Principles Behind Strengths Gym

- Strengths can be found across the curriculum
 - ➔ Finding opportunities to focus on strengths across the curriculum helps to develop a coherent approach to strengths and well-being across the school
- Students are natural leaders in their particular strengths
- Enjoyment matters
 - ➔ When we enjoy what we do, we do it better



Applying PPIs in Schools

- **Meta-Analysis Findings of PPIs** *(Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009)*
- **Self-selection**
 - ➔ Those who elect to participate experience greater gains in well-being
- **Benefits increase with age**
- **Format matters**
 - ➔ Gains greatest for individual therapy, followed by group-administered PPIs, then self-administered PPIs
- **Longer interventions produce greater gains in well-being**



Considerations

- PPIs have been found to significantly enhance well-being and decrease depressive symptoms
- Evidence to suggest building all strengths is best:
 - ➡ Building all strengths enables children to gravitate towards their 'top' strengths *(Seligman, 2002)*
 - ➡ Character strengths not assumed to be fixed or immutable *(Peterson, 2006)*
 - ⇒ If not fostered it is reasonable to assume they will be lost over the course of development
 - ➡ Research findings support a scattered approach in which individuals regularly practice multiple and different positive activities *(Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009)*
 - ⇒ More effective than engaging in only one activity



Thank You!



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