

## Walking on Two Legs: Existential Positive Psychology

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If I neglect my healthy right leg and choose to hop around the world rather than walk, I'd be emulating positive psychology. To constantly support myself with my left leg isn't walking. Instead, walking involves transferring weight from the left leg to the right and vice versa repeatedly (adapted from Kahane, 2009). The relevance of this analogy for positive psychology might not seem obvious, and might seem surprising coming from us, scholars aligned with positive psychology. Nonetheless, positive psychology often hops rather than walks due to its emphasis on one side of the good life.

Paul Wong's (2021) editorial on existential positive psychology clarifies the needed additional leg for positive psychology. Wong begins with an assumption that life is tragic. The pandemic makes tragedy more obvious, but tragedy is omnipresent, pandemic or not. All societies have inequity, and that in itself puts people in tragic situations.

For people enduring the pandemic, prototypical positive psychology might recommend happiness-building exercises. These might involve gratitude exercises, or optimism exercises, or even meditation of some form. However, people enduring the pandemic face tragedy around themselves regardless of whether they practice happiness building-exercises and whether or not these exercises give some relief. In that context, happiness exercises are not enough. One must learn to cope without denial of, or mere distraction from, tragedy.

Existential positive psychology, as proposed by Wong (2021), faces tragedy without denial, but still retains the positive psychology expectation that humans can produce positive outcomes. Virtue, growth, and, yes, even some happiness are possible while people remain conscious of tragedy.

Admittedly, some positive psychologists already include discussion of existentialism, tragedy, and the dark side of life within positive psychology (Compton & Hoffman, 2020; Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014); nonetheless, these themes are relatively neglected by positive psychology broadly.

We do have some concerns with Wong's (2021) models. One of our concerns relates to the complexity. At a strategic level, complexity can make ideas less memorable. Furthermore, at an epistemological level, we have faced data showing error in our own simple models of reality, so complex models further raise our suspicions that some of the elements may be overconfidently asserted.

Nonetheless, we see much value in elements of Wong's (2021) proposal for existential positive psychology. For example, Wong affirms the value of elements of Buddhism; consistent with this proposal, recent work supports Buddhism's noble truth that desire reduces well-being (Murphy et al., 2021). Furthermore, Wong puts emphasis on wisdom and virtue. We've written previously about positive psychology's need to focus more on wisdom (Tweed et al., in press) and virtue (Proctor et al., under review). Also, Wong proposes that healthy living integrates the dark and bright elements of the self, and consistent with this proposal, much research supports the value of recognizing positive traits and potential among people, even while simultaneously acknowledging all people embody some evil (Tweed et al., 2020). Furthermore, centuries ago,

Blaise Pascal wrote about a God-shaped vacuum felt within the human heart; the pervasiveness of religious belief in all cultures concurs with Pascal's observation, and Wong's existential positive psychology explicitly makes room for discussion of this topic.

Overall, we concur with Wong's (2021) claim that existential positive psychology, also called PP 2.0, provides an exciting direction for positive psychology. PP 2.0 provides a valuable path toward a science that can help to build more peace within and among people. The creators and consumers of this science can build positive outcomes even while feeling less need to deny or distract themselves from the reality of imperfections in the world, in other people, and in themselves. This recognition of and response to tragedy adds a second leg that can greatly enhance positive psychology's functioning.

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