Third World Congress on Positive Psychology:

The latest research, brought back by Rachel Clements...

September 2013

On 27 June 2013, thousands of Positive Psychologists descended upon Los Angeles for the Third World Congress on Positive Psychology. The three days of the conference were jam packed with international leading researchers in the area of Positive Psychology such as Dr Martin Seligman, Dr Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Dr Barbara Fredrickson, Dr Richard Lerner and Dr Roy Baumeister just to name a few. It was an amazing three days, soaking up the latest research in this area, as well as learning from the plethora of international consultants who are designing and implementing Positive Psychology based programs in workplaces, schools, detention centres and tertiary educational facilities with outstanding results.

The conference kicked off with an incredible plenary session conducted by Dr Barbara Fredrickson. The session was entitled “How Love Creates Health” and was based on her latest research and book. Dr Fredrickson is well known for the development of her Broaden and Build theory of positive emotions. Essentially, this theory states that the experience of positive emotions such as joy, contentment, love, appreciation in the short term, help to broaden one’s thoughts which leads to building one’s cognitive, social, psychological and physical resources in the longer term. Laboratory controlled experiments have repeatedly found that positive mood states have significant outcomes on measures such as:

- creativity and receptivity to information
- higher order thought processes to solve problems
- attention to and awareness of others
- trust and empathy
- memory and problem solving

Negative emotions, on the other hand, such as anxiety, low mood, worry, anger, have been found to narrow one’s thoughts which, in turn, limits the building of our cognitive, social, psychological and physical capacity and tends to keep people stuck in their current predicament or unhelpful situation.
As such, this evidence indicates that positive emotions help to broaden people’s mindsets, which builds their resources for interacting successfully with their environment.

In this plenary session, Dr Fredrickson outlined her Broaden and Build theory and then focused the rest of the discussion on her research undertaken on just one positive emotions: love.

Dr Fredrickson, after humoursly debunking common myths and definitions of love, described love as “micromoments of positivity resonance”. The experience of positivity resonance was likened to when one might have a very brief interaction with someone and gains a sense of connection such as through smiling, mirroring or a sense of ‘he/she really gets me’. These interactions lead us to experience positive emotions.

Dr Fredrickson has undertaken interesting research exploring the relationship between love (positivity resonance) and physical health, most notably our heart. Through carefully controlled experimental designs, where Dr Fredrickson either induced or did not induce the emotion of love in people, showed that the experience of love (even for a brief moment) led to better heart health (vagal tone, cardio regulation and a better immune system) than those who did not experience the emotion of love. Basically, she concluded that positivity resonance or love, is like a tune up to our hearts, even operating at the cellular level where love and kindness, at the very basic level has the capacity to change people’s cells and immunises us against the effects of poor mental health. To learn more about this amazing research, go to Dr Fredrickson’s website at www.positivityresonance.com.

A major theme of the conference was the study of the mind-body connection using Positive Psychology principles and sophisticated physical health measures. Like Dr Fredrickson, many researchers had focused on one particular aspect of Positive Psychology such as laughter, gratitude, and using one’s strengths to build resilience and found positive relationships with physical well-being measures such as heart rate, vagal tone, cortisol levels, as well as psychological well-being measures such as mood, resilience, optimism, happiness. Such research again demonstrated that Positive Psychology approaches can have a powerful effect on our physical well-being and in turn, assists with our psychological and physical resilience.

There was also an interesting session on Lawyers in the US which outlined the following statistics:

- 90% of Lawyers have a resilience score of below the 50th percentile
- Lawyers score on the 12th percentile for sociability
- Lawyers score on the 90th percentile for scepticism
- Lawyers most value abstract reasoning and autonomy
Due to these findings, it was deemed that such tendencies are resulting in Lawyers being very much at risk for the development of mental health issues due to their potential isolation, pessimistic, or sceptical thinking and lower levels of emotional resilience.

One consultant at the conference presented the outcomes of his resilience training which he has undertaken with a group of Lawyers over a three to four week period and found that by imbedding training in three areas such as building better relationships, optimistic thinking and noticing three good things every day (a strategy for developing optimistic thinking), 60% of the group reported taking positive action and change and 46% of the group reported improved well-being as a result of the training.

Due to today’s complex and fast paced workplaces, the need for resilience training was highlighted using a Positive Psychology based approach. Numerous studies at the conference showed strong emotional gains from Positive Psychology based interventions, which demonstrates that positive psychology indeed has an important role to play in many contexts, and at work, in particular. Not only can Positive Psychology interventions improve well-being, resilience, mood and optimism but it can also have a profound impact on productivity, performance, attendance, team functioning and organisational profitability and performance.

It was also noted that many consultants and researchers tended to use Positive Psychology based resilience programs, with a high functioning population, such as corporate employees or students. Although facilitative effects were noted in these studies there was perhaps only one presentation where positive psychology was being used to facilitate recovery in a population of people recovering from mental health issues such as depression or anxiety.

Based on extensive research including the recent learning’s from the conference, the Centre for Corporate Health and Resilia have recently developed The Resilience Box™, a 24 module Positive Psychology based resilience program which incorporates all of the latest research in this area in a comprehensive package in which clients can pick and choose modules depending on their specific needs. Not only is this program being used to assist people in their work, but it is also being used with people who are on the road to recovery following a mental health issue, as a treatment enhancement program.

It certainly is an exciting time in the area of Positive Psychology, with interesting and well designed research being conducted all over the world. I am already looking forward to the Fourth World Congress on Positive Psychology in two years time.

If you would like some more information on how Positive Psychology can be used within your organisation, please contact us on 02 8243 1500 or at admin@cfch.com.au