



Adding Science to the Mix of Business & Pleasure:

An Exploratory Study of Positive Psychology Interventions with Teachers Accessing Employee Assistance Counselling

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1

February 2013 – Graduation
M.Ed. (Psych), University of Manitoba

EAP



2010 – A thesis proposal is born . . .

2007-08 – Global financial crisis

1998 – Positive psychology is founded

. . . I wondered what role concepts of positive psychology might have in helping people in the workplace to not only cope more effectively, but open their hearts and minds to move forward with newfound confidence, resilience, determination, hope, and vision for a better future?

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2



What is Positive Psychology?

- The scientific study of :
 - optimal human functioning, flourishing, what makes life most worth living, and authentic and enduring happiness
 - positive experiences and positive individual traits, and the institutions that facilitate their development
- A relatively new branch of psychology, founded in 1998 by psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman, albeit with strong roots in the work of humanistic psychology
- The study of what is right with people

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3



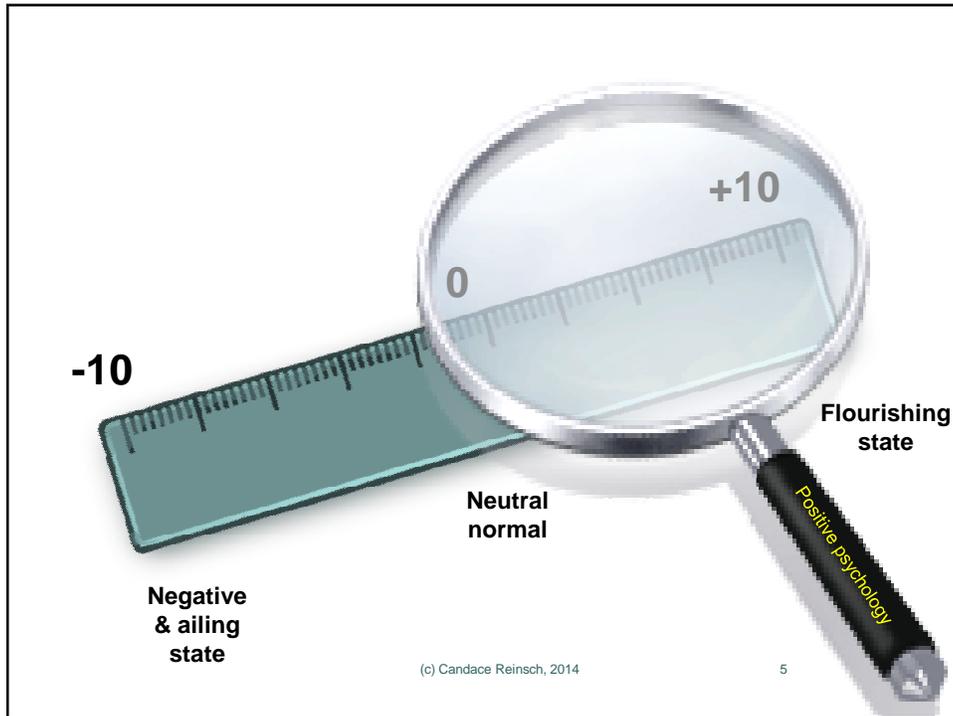
Positive Psychology Goals

- Families and schools that allow children to flourish
- Workplaces that foster satisfaction and high productivity
- Communities that encourage civic engagement
- Therapists who identify and nurture their clients' strengths
- The teaching of positive psychology
- Dissemination of positive psychology interventions in organizations & communities

Source: University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Center

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4



● ● ● | Research Question

- Can the delivery of positive psychology interventions by counselling professionals in the workplace increase employee happiness and decrease symptoms of depression?

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6



Literature Review

Highlights

- This project is the first study of its kind to develop, implement and measure a comprehensive positive psychology intervention in the workplace through an EAP
- Application of positive psychology to EA field is still in infancy
 - Applications of positive psychology to the workplace more generally includes research on transformational leadership, the strengths-based development work of the Gallup organization, the growth of executive coaching through the lens of positive psychology and the development of the field of positive organizational behavior (POB) in the management literature
- A recent article in the *Journal of Employee Assistance* contends that positive psychology offers new opportunities for EAP workplace interventions (Taranowski, 2009)

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7

- The emerging science of positive psychology provides both a theoretical framework along with a growing list of empirically validated counselling interventions to assist progressive employers and EAPs to both enhance employee well-being as well as decrease the incidence of psychopathology in the workplace
- Wellness promotion is an established ancillary to the EAP core technology that is universally recognized in the field (Beidel & Brennan, 2004)
- Few workplaces include programs that promote positive psychological well-being; instead most research on mental health in the workplace has taken a stress-and-strain or 'fixing what's wrong' approach to the development of well-being (Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2012)

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8

- Depression and related mood disorders are becoming more pervasive across North American workplaces today
- Employers are becoming increasingly interested in investing in employee mental health and there is a new field of workplace health promotion
- RCTs of positive psychology interventions have been found to reduce depressive symptoms and increase lasting happiness in samples of mildly to moderately depressed university students, severely depressed young adults, middle school students, and a convenience sample of visitors to Seligman's authentic happiness website. Participants not uncommonly reported the interventions to be "life-changing"

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9



Conceptual Foundations

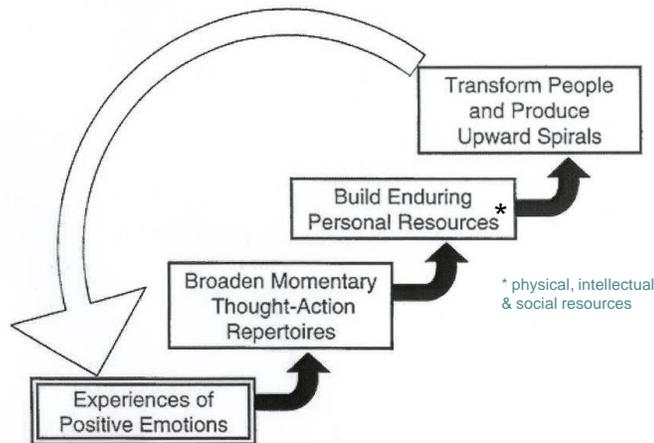
- Fredrickson's (1998, 2001) broaden and build theory of positive emotions
- Seligman, Rashid and Park's (2006) conceptualization of positive psychotherapy
- Yalom's (2005) interpersonal approach to group psychotherapy

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10



Broaden & Build Theory



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Positive Psychotherapy

- PPT is essentially the application of positive psychology to therapy.
- Its central hypothesis is that building positive emotions, strengths, and meaning (in addition to treating symptoms) is key in the treatment of psychopathology, and that this serves us best not when life is easy, but when life is difficult.

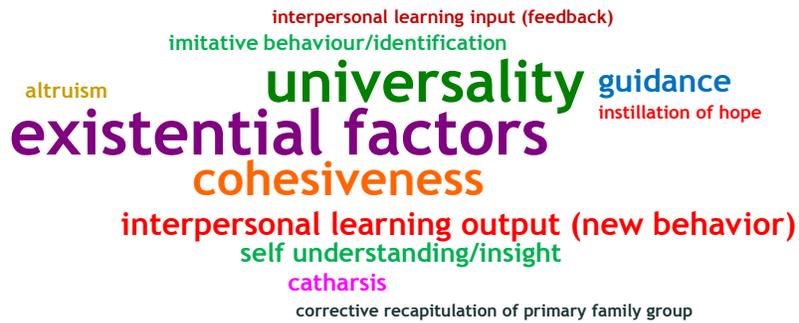


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12



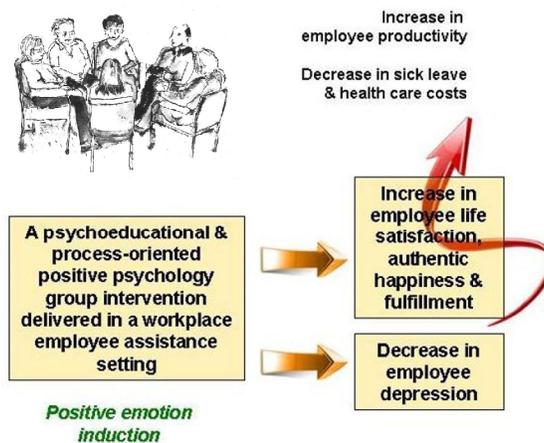
Therapeutic Factors



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Conceptual Model Depicting Predicted Causal Paths Between Intervention & Change in Well-Being for Employees



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Method **Overview**

- A small convenience sample of 14 Manitoba public school educators accessing employee assistance were recruited for a quasi-experimental research design. (The goal was to recruit 20 participants.)
- 9 participants were randomly assigned to the experimental group and the remaining participants assigned to the control.
- Experimental group members participated in a 6 session psychoeducational, experiential and process-oriented positive psychotherapy group developed and delivered by the primary researcher.
- The experimental group met one weekday evening a week for 2 hours, over a 6 week period, from January 23 to March 5, 2012.
- In May 2012, control group participants were invited to a complimentary 2 hour presentation on positive psychology, an overview of the study and received a package of take-home exercises.

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15



Sample Characteristics **N = 13**

Group assignment	
Experimental	Control
9 (69%)	4 (31%)

Gender	
Male	Female
2 (15%)	11 (85%)

Employment category	
Teacher	Administrator or other
9 (69%)	4 (31%)

The mean age of the sample is 46 years (SD = 12.19).

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16



Measures

- All study participants completed the **outcome measures** of:
 - **authentic happiness** (Positive Psychotherapy Inventory, PPTI, Rashid, 2005) **and**
 - **depression** (Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale, CES-D, Radloff, 1977)at 3 time intervals: pre-intervention, post-intervention, and one month post-intervention.
- The experimental group members also completed **measures of group process**, particularly a measure of the **therapeutic factors** that were most significant to them using the Therapeutic Factor Scale (Butler & Fuhriman, 1983) and also a **group evaluation** form. They also completed **journals** to track their thoughts and feelings about authentic happiness, as well as their experiences of the group and relationships within it.

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17

The Positive Psychotherapy Inventory (PPTI)

This measure is a 21-item positive psychotherapy self-report tool that assesses the frequency of Seligman's (2002) conceptualization of happiness. Seligman decomposes the vague and fuzzy notion of "happiness" into 3 more scientifically measurable and manageable components: **positive emotion (the pleasant life), engagement (the engaged life), and meaning (the meaningful life).**

Pleasant life (PL) scores are attained by adding 7 specific items, engaged life (EL) scores are determined by adding another 7 items, and a meaningful life (ML) score is calculated by adding the final 7 items. Scores for a pleasant life, engaged life and meaningful life range from 0 to 21, with higher scores indicating higher satisfaction. All three scores can be added together for an overall happiness score – which ranges from 0 to 63.

A sample item measuring PL is as follows:

Joy
0. I rarely feel joyful
1. I occasionally feel joyful.
2. I feel more joyful than joyless.
3. I usually feel joyful.

A sample item measuring EL is as follows:

Knowing strengths
0. I do not know my strengths.
1. I have some idea about my strengths.
2. I know my strengths.
3. I am very well aware of my strengths.

A sample item measuring ML is as follows:

Sense of meaning
0. I rarely feel like my life has a purpose.
1. I occasionally feel like my life has a purpose.
2. I often feel like my life has a purpose.
3. I usually feel like my life has a purpose.

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The Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CES-D) Scale

Below is a list of ways you might have felt or behaved. Please tell me how often you have felt this way *during the past week*.

	Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)	Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)	Occasionally or a moderate amount of the time (3-4 days)	Most or all of the time (5-7 days)
1. I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.				
2. I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor.				
3. I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with help from my family or friends.				
4. I felt I was just as good as other people.				
5. I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing.				
6. I felt depressed.				
7. I felt that everything I did was an effort.				
8. I felt hopeful about the future.				
9. I thought my life had been a failure.				
10. I felt fearful.				
11. My sleep was restless.				
12. I was happy.				
13. I talked less than usual.				
14. I felt lonely.				
15. People were unfriendly.				
16. I enjoyed life.				
17. I had crying spells.				
18. I felt sad.				
19. I felt that people dislike me.				
20. I could not get "going."				

The final score spans from 0 to 60, with a higher score indicating greater impairment.

Psychologists use the cutoff of 16 to differentiate depressed persons from non-depressed ones.

CES-D scores of 16 to 26 are considered indicative of mild depression and scores of 27 or more indicative of major depression.

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19



Research Design

R Experimental	O ₁ , O ₂	X ₁	O ₁ , O ₂	O ₁ , O ₂	
R Control	O ₁ , O ₂		O ₁ , O ₂	O ₁ , O ₂	X ₂
		T1 - pre-intervention	T2 - post-intervention	T3 - one month post-intervention	

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20



Procedures

- Participants were recruited via posters located at EAP offices, handbills provided by counsellors during counselling sessions with existing EAP clients and information provided over the phone by EAP intake staff for new EAP client contacts.
- All prospective participants were interviewed for suitability by the primary researcher.
- Interviews provided preparation for group work, including addressing a variety of misconceptions and unrealistic fears that people commonly have about group work as well as teaching prospective members realistic and positive expectations about group therapy.
- Inclusion criteria were as follows:
 - Commitment to attend all 6 sessions
 - Commitment to complete weekly assignments
 - Willingness to discuss personal challenges openly in a small group environment
 - Report not currently being in the midst of an acute life crisis
 - Report no anxiety, low anxiety or moderate anxiety symptoms
 - Report no depression, low depression or moderate depression symptoms

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21

Recruitment Poster

The ongoing impacts of the global financial recession have taken a significant toll on the *financial wealth* of all Canadians. But, how is your *psychological wealth* faring? Have you ever stopped to ask yourself, "Am I doing well, or just getting by?" Perhaps you are looking for greater fulfillment, satisfaction and genuine happiness in your life?

If questions like these have been on your mind, please consider joining us to participate in:

Exploring Authentic Happiness

A Personal Growth Group

A pilot project available free-of-charge to clients of the
Employee Assistance Program



By participating in this self-discovery and growth group, you will have the opportunity to:

- Learn what pioneering **positive psychology research** has shown makes people happy
- Learn and practice activities that have the power to improve your sense of well-being such as identifying your signature strengths, practicing flexible optimism, exploring mindfulness, practicing relaxation activities, and much more!

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22

Curriculum Manual
First Print
now available

EXPLORING AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS



Includes
ready-to-use
participant handouts

A Personal Growth Group
Counselling Manual for
Employee Assistance Programs

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23



Six Week Group Curriculum

Session 1. Introduction: Exploring the Meaning of Happiness

Session 2. The Happiness Formula

Session 3. Signature Strengths & Satisfaction about the Past

Session 4. Optimism about the Future

Session 5. Happiness in the Present

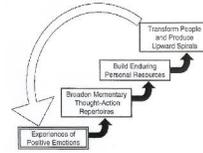
Session 6. Wrap Up: Integration, Reflections & Evaluation

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24

Session 1: Introduction: Exploring the Meaning of Happiness

- Standard group opening procedures
- Relaxation/grounding activity
- Exploring the meaning of happiness
- “Wise man of the gulf” reading (Snyder & Lopez, 2002)
- Presentation on the broaden & build theory of the evolutionary purpose of positive emotions & research findings that positive emotions build physical, social & intellectual resources (Fredrickson, 2001; Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005)
- 4 archetypes of happiness self-reflection activity (Ben-Shahar, 2007)
- Homework: Journaling tool



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25

Session 2: The Happiness Formula

- Relaxation/grounding activity
- Presentation on positive psychology's contribution to the study of happiness, including the happiness formula, the hedonic treadmill, circumstances & voluntary activities (Seligman, 2002; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005)
- View video clip on the world's happiest country
- Review Frisch's happiness pie and draw personal pies, both real and ideal – a self-reflection activity (Frisch, 2005)
- Homework: VIA signature strengths survey



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26

Session 3: Signature Strengths & Satisfaction about the Past

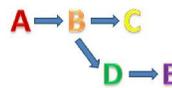


- Relaxation/grounding activity
- Presentation on strengths, virtues & signature strengths & Seligman's pleasant life, good/engaged life, meaningful life & full life (Seligman & Peterson, 2004; Seligman, 2002)
- Review & discuss VIA signature strengths survey homework
- Focus discussion on satisfaction with the past
 - Introduction to gratitude
 - Gratitude pen & paper activity (Wilson, 2006)
 - Introduce writing/journaling about emotional experiences (Pennebaker, 1997)
- Homework: Using your strengths in a new way, three good things exercise & gratitude visit (optional)

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Session 4: Optimism about the Future



- Relaxation/grounding activity
- Focus discussion on optimism, including an optimism-pessimism questionnaire, presentation of facts about optimism, learned optimism, how optimists and pessimists respond to failure, and explanatory styles of permanence, pervasiveness & personalization (Seligman, 1990)
- Presentation of ABCDE model as a tool to increase optimism, following by pairs work and large group discussion
- Homework: Complete ABCDE worksheet for an adversity you experience in the coming week & Best possible selves exercise (King, 2001)

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28



Session 5: Happiness in the Present



- Relaxation/grounding activity
- Presentation on pleasures versus gratifications, six techniques that prolong the pleasures, habituation and the loss of pleasure, flow, shortcuts and longcuts (Seligman, 2002)
- Focus discussion on mindfulness & savoring, including mindfully eating one raisin exercise (Williams, Teasdale, Segal & Kabat-Zinn, 2007)
- Recalling flow experiences dyad activity (Magyar-Moe, 2009; Csikszentmihalyi, 1991)
- Focus discussion on active & constructive responding in relationships, including a pairs exercise (Gable, Reis, Impett & Asher, 2004)
- Homework: Shortcuts and longcuts (Seligman, 2002) & practicing mindfulness in everyday activities (Williams, et al., 2007)

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29



Session 6: Wrap Up: Integration, Reflections & Evaluation

- Relaxation/grounding activity
- Focus on closing activities including a large group brainstorm of activities that contribute to happiness & each participant identifying personal “keys to happiness” – a take-home talisman
- Final check-out and evaluations



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30



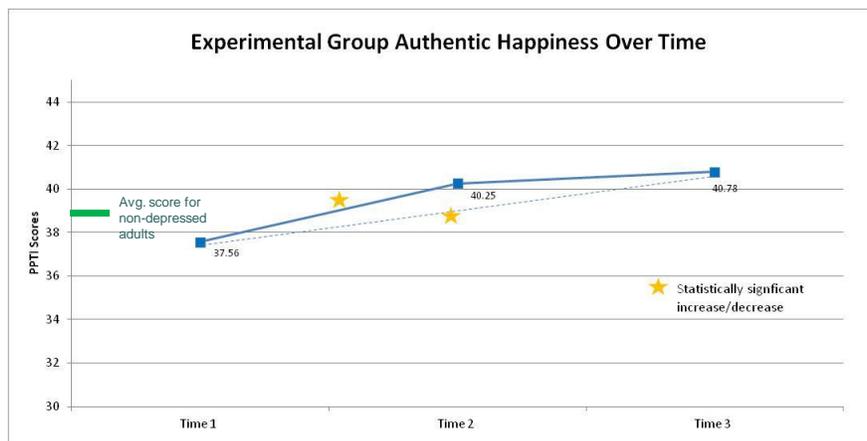
Outcome Measure Results

- Authentic happiness PPTI data for experimental and control group participants at T1 (pre-intervention), T2 (immediately post-intervention) & T3 (1 month post-intervention)
- Depression CES-D data for experimental and control group participants at T1 (pre-intervention), T2 (immediately post-intervention) & T3 (1 month post-intervention)

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31

Repeated Measures t-Test Results



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32

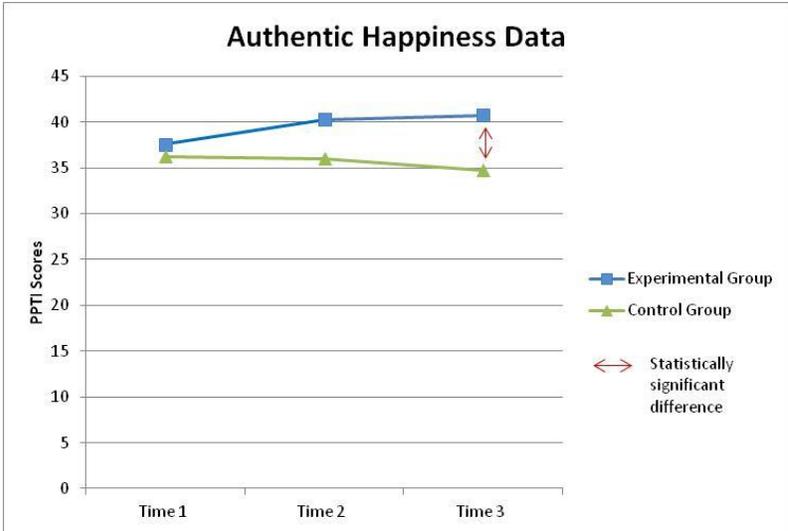
Repeated Measures t-Test Results



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33

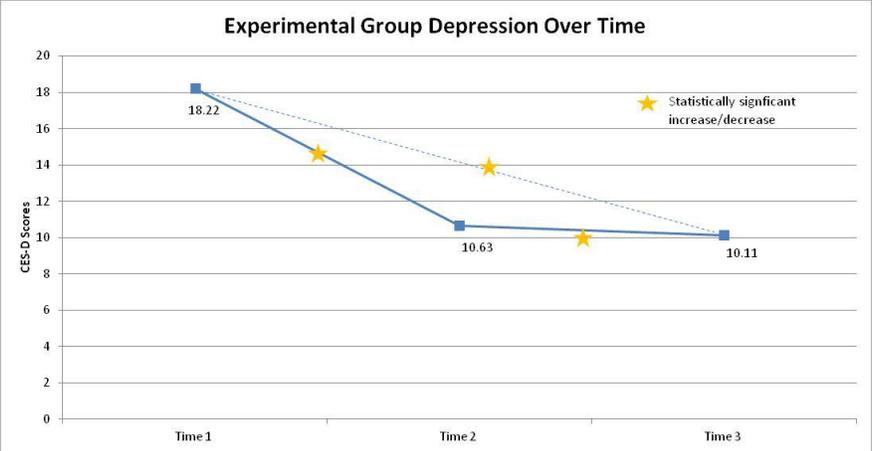
Independent Sample t-Test Results



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34

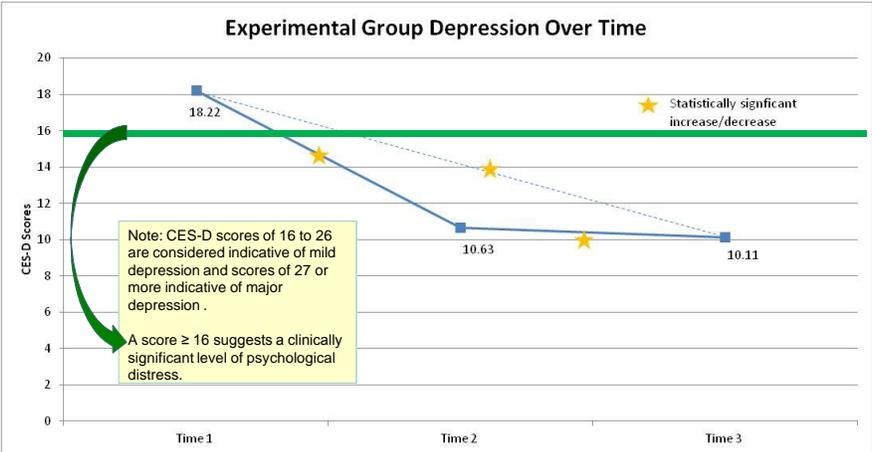
Repeated Measures t-Test Results



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35

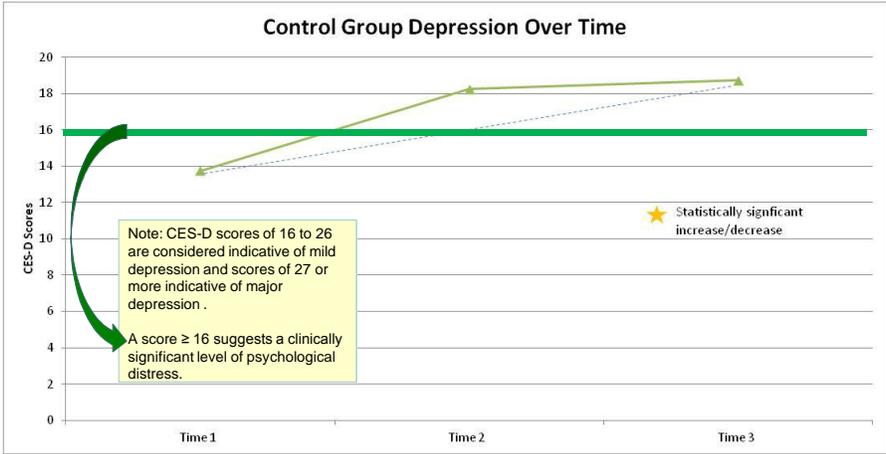
Repeated Measures t-Test Results



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36

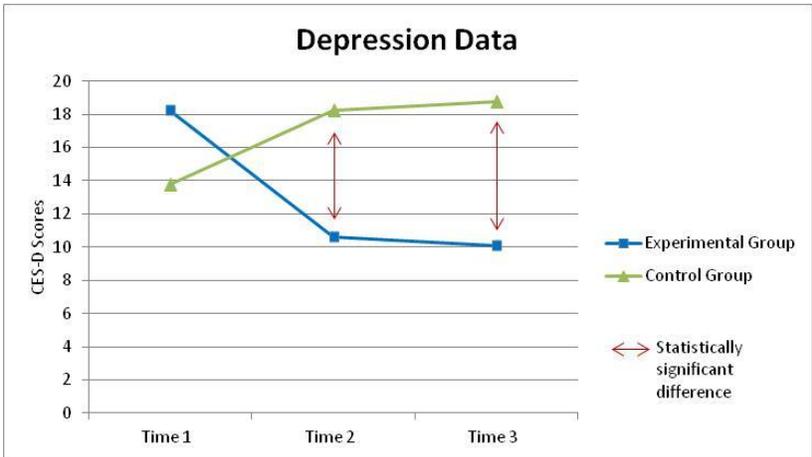
Repeated Measures t-Test Results



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37

Independent Sample t-Test Results



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38



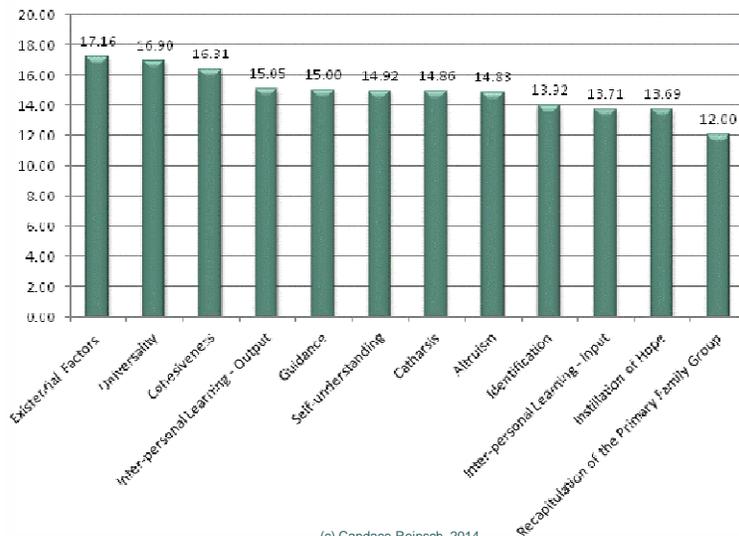
Process Measure Results

- Therapeutic Factor Scale rankings
- Qualitative content analysis of journals
- Qualitative content analysis of group evaluations

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39

Ranking of Therapeutic Factors from Most Valuable to Least Valuable



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40



Content Analysis of Journal Entries

- **What does happiness mean to you?**
 - Majority of respondents included hedonic and eudaimonic elements, the importance of positive relations with others and personal growth & accomplishment and self-acceptance
- **Is your definition of happiness shifting or changing in any way?**
 - Some participants noted slight shifts while others noted significant shifts; many also noted an increase in environmental mastery and internal locus of control, social acceptance/tolerance and personal growth
- **How are you feeling about the group and relationships in it?**
 - Majority of respondents spoke about the importance of group cohesiveness and universality, interpersonal sharing and self-disclosure in a group context, self-understanding and interpersonal learning-output. A significant number of participants also suggested adding more sessions, or meeting bi-weekly.

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41



Content Analysis of Group Evaluations

- **What was most helpful about the group?**
 - Identifying and exploring personal strengths as well as the strengths of others in their lives, universality (feeling less alone) and mindfulness
- **What was the most important thing to me about the group?**
 - Providing a structured and consistent time and place to meet and observing changes in one's personal happiness levels over time
- **What were the most important topics discussed?**
 - Signature strengths, gratitude, mindful attention to the present, learned optimism and the happiness formula
- **What would you suggest changing to improve the group?**
 - More time dedicated to sharing in pairs and/or small groups

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42



Summary & Conclusions

- Despite the study's small N, the results of this research project provide promising confirmation of the research hypothesis that the delivery of positive psychology interventions in a group format through EAPs can make a meaningful difference in employees' lives by enhancing well-being and decreasing symptoms of depression, and maintaining these statistically significant gains 1-month post-intervention.

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43

- There are advantages of a wellness approach, rather than a disorder focused approach, when addressing sub-threshold depression symptoms in the workplace:
 - By focusing on the positive, we remove the stigma that often poses a barrier to seeking treatment
 - Unlike problem solving, which can often be an arduous task, discussing and improving upon positive aspects of one's life is immediately rewarding
- As employers across industrialized nations become increasingly interested in employee mental health, EAPs are well-positioned to take a leadership role and assist progressive employers by offering empirically validated positive psychology interventions to employees like the one developed for this thesis project.

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44

Questions?

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