The Character Strength of Kindness and Its Relation to Happiness

Positive Psychology

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[Dr. Diessner has written permission from Ms. Zagelow to use her paper as an example paper.

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to further support past research that found using the positive psychology intervention, *using a character strength in a new way*, increased happiness for up to six months (Seligman et al., 2005). This character strength intervention was used in the current study and had one participant, myself, choose one of my signature strengths and use it in a new way every day for one week straight. To determine my signature strength, I completed the VIA strengths survey, which provided me with my top five character strengths. I chose the character strength of kindness as the focus of this study. Before the intervention, I completed the Measure of State Happiness scale (Witvliet et al., 2019), and took the same scale after completing the intervention to see if there was a change in my level of happiness. The results show that it is likely that I experienced an increased level of happiness after completing the intervention.

The Character Strength of Kindness and Its Relation to Happiness

What purpose do positive character strengths serve? Character strengths have the ability to produce positive effects on well-being through strengths interventions, while also enhancing an individual's level of "confidence, success expectations, perseverance and resilience and is linked to positive feelings such as excitement and joy" (Ghielen, Woerkom, & Meyers, 2018, p. 579). Character strengths have been described as, "Basic building blocks of a flourishing life; character strengths are the pathways to well-being, described as PERMA - Positive emotions, Engagement, positive Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment" (Niemiec, 2017, p. 2). Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed a list of twenty-four character strengths that people can have. When a person completes the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths test, they will receive a hierarchical list of their values. Signature strengths are those that are within the top five of their character strengths list. According to Hone, Jarden, Duncan, and Schofield (2015), people who frequently use their signature character strengths are eighteen times more likely to be flourishing compared to those who do not frequently use their strengths. Character strengths are core to one's personal identity.

Kindness

Kindness is one of the twenty-four character strengths. In a study done by Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2006), kindness was found to be one of the most commonly endorsed strengths. This study consisted of 117,676 adults from across 54 nations and all 50 US States. Kindness is defined by Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) as "Doing good deeds for others [altruistic love]" (p. 412) and by Niemiec (2017) as "generous; nurturing; caring; compassionate; altruistic; nice" (CSI 7). Of the twenty-four different character strengths, kindness was my number one signature strength. Kindness can mean many things, but to me it means helping

others in need and fostering kind acts in order to create a sense of community. There are many ways to be kind, such as celebrating someone you love, holding the door open for the person behind you, giving a compliment, or donating old clothing. Kindness also includes being kind to oneself. Kindness unites people. Kindness is overarching. Kindness is the most important strength of them all, in my opinion. As evidenced by Otake, Shimai, Tanaka, Otsui, and Frederickson (2006), generally kind people experience more happiness and have happier memories compared to those who are less kind. Otake et al. (2006) had 175 participants count acts of kindness for one week, and their results showed that after this intervention, people appeared to become happier. Their results suggest that "happy people are more kind in the first place and that they can become even happier, kinder, and more grateful following a simple intervention" (p. 370). Their research also suggests that there may be a reciprocal relationship between kindness and happiness. As Otake et al.(2006) explains, "if people experience positive emotions and optimal social conditions as a result of their own kindness, an upward spiral may be created" (p. 371). Kindness is an important character strength that influences well-being. Kindness incorporates other character strengths such as love, fairness, forgiveness, and gratitude.

Happiness

According to Seligman et al. (2005), individuals who are happier are not only healthier, but are also more successful, and are more socially engaged. Participants in Seligman et al. (2005) study were asked to perform two different interventions: *using signature strengths in a new way* and *three good things.* In *using signature strengths in a new way*, participants had to use one of their signature strengths in a new way every day for one week. In *three good things,* participants were asked to write down three good things that happened that day and why they think they occurred, every day for one week. For both interventions, participants experienced an

increased level of happiness and decreased depressed emotions for up to six months (Seligman et al., 2005). The findings have significant meaning in terms of application to large populations. The interventions are relatively simple and can have a lasting impact on one's well-being. Even the participants in the control condition experienced more happiness and less depressed emotions immediately afterwards (Seligman et al., 2005).

The current study attempts to replicate one of these positive psychological interventions. Similar to Seligman et al. (2005), I want to investigate whether or not this exercise will increase my overall level of happiness. For the current study, I hypothesize that after completing the positive psychology intervention of using the character strength of kindness in a new way every day for seven days, my happiness level will be higher on my post-state measure of happiness test than it was on my pre-test.

Method

Participant (Subject)

There was one participant for this study, which was myself. I am 20 years old, five-foot, 1 inch tall, and an Asian American female. I was born and raised in Lewiston, Idaho. My name is Ashlyn Zagelow, I am a junior at Lewis-Clark State College. I am a psychology major, who is currently enrolled in a positive psychology course, where this research project took place.

Measures

The two tools used for measurement were the VIA strengths survey (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and the Measure of State Happiness (Witvliet, Richie, Root Luna, & Van Tongeren, 2019). The VIA strengths survey has a mean consistency reliability of about .79, a mean reliability of about .83, which are very good. The validity coefficient ranges from about .39-.50. This assessment has participants answer 120 questions in order to determine their top

character strengths. The self-report survey provides descriptions of an activity, situation, or behavior, and the participant is asked if the statement is either "very much like me, like me, neutral, unlike me, very unlike me." Examples of questions include, "I experience deep emotion when I see beautiful things," or, "I always treat people fairly whether I like them or not" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The Measure of State Happiness scale contains one question to determine happiness levels, which is "right now, how happy are you?" The respondent is asked to be mindful and take a moment to meditate on how happy they feel, and then they must circle an option on the 10-point scale, with 1 being "not at all" and 10 being "completely." As it is a single item it cannot have internal consistency, which is the most common form of reported reliability. However, a test-retest correlation (which indicates a form of reliability called temporal stability) was shown to r (153) = 0.81, $p < 0.01$, indicating good reliability (Witvliet et al., 2019). It has shown predictive validity and known groups validity, in regard to predicting higher levels of happiness between experimental and control conditions in a study about hope and gratefulness (Witvliet et al., 2019).

Procedure

This procedure required a multi-step process in order to complete the intervention. First, I had to take the 120 question VIA character strengths survey (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) in order to identify my signature strengths. Once my top five character strengths were determined, I chose one character strength to use as the focus of this week-long intervention. I chose my number one character strength, which is kindness. Before I began the intervention, I completed the Measure of State Happiness scale (Witvliet et al., 2019) as a pre-test. For the next seven days, I had to find a different or new way of using kindness. On day 1 of the intervention, I used

my character strength of kindness by paying for the person's drink behind me in line at

Starbucks. On day 2, I put all the dishes in the dishwasher away, even though it is normally my

boyfriend's "job" in our relationship. On day 3, I sent my boyfriend's mom a text saying: Hope

you have a great day (heart emoji). On day 4, I sent my friend a motivational quote that I had

seen on Facebook, knowing that she was having a rough week. On day 5, I helped my grandpa

look for his dog. Once we found her, I spent the afternoon with him and had lunch together. On

day 6, I helped my mom with dinner. On day 7, I ran errands for my dad because he was having

a busy day. Once I had finished my 7-day daily journal, I took the Measure of State Happiness

scale (Witvliet et al., 2019) again as a post-test to determine if there was a change in my

happiness.

Results

The Measure of State Happiness scale was used for the pre and post-test. My score for

the pre-test was a 4. My score for the post-test was a 9. The change seems to be significant, as I

had an increase of 5 points on the scale. It seems that I was happier after using the character

strength of kindness in a new way every day for one week.

Discussion

My results reflect the results of past research in this field of study. The Measure of State

Happiness (Witvliet et al., 2019) scale provided data to show the increase in my level of

happiness after using kindness in a different way every day for seven days. This research project

further supports the claims made by Seligman et al. (2005), explaining that this intervention is

correlated with an increase in happiness. As previously discussed, participants in Seligman et al.

(2005) study experienced an increase in happiness for up to six months after completing the

intervention. This increase in my level of happiness could be due to practicing and implementing

one of my signature strengths. Kindness is my very top signature strength, which illustrates that kindness is something that I highly value in my life. By nurturing and exercising this strength for a week straight, it is likely that I experienced an increased level of happiness as a result.

Otake et al. (2006) notes that kindness can cause happiness. Their results show that acting on, keeping track of, and recognizing their acts of kindness has the potential to enhance an individual's happiness level. Their study makes me wonder what mechanisms are being used to link kindness and happiness. Their study also calls into question if there are differences in results between those in collectivistic cultures and individualistic cultures, since their participants were Japanese college students. Would there be significant differences in the common acts of kindness they experienced? It would be very interesting to see this study replicated across these different cultures, or even across different countries within the same culture. For example, do Chinese and Laotians experience similar or different levels of happiness after counting their acts of kindness for one week?

Limitations

Although this study was supportive of past research done by Seligman et al. (2005), there were definite limitations. One limitation was sample size, as there was only one participant who was also the researcher herself. Knowing what the likely outcome of this intervention would be could also alter my score on the post-test Measure of State Happiness (Witvliet et al., 2019). Also, unlike the research done by Seligman et al. (2005), I did not keep track of my levels of happiness for six months following the intervention.

Future Research

For research in the future, an improvement that could be made would include having the participant track their levels of happiness for the next six months upon completion of the

intervention in order to add to the credibility of the study. Another improvement would be

changing the assignment's date altogether. During the time that I completed the pre-test Measure

of State Happiness (Witvliet et al., 2019), it was midterms, which had me in a very distressed

and unhappy state. In a normal school week, I would not usually score a 4, it would likely be

higher. The last improvement I would suggest would be to have the participant choose a

character strength that is not in their top five, but perhaps in their bottom five. Personally, I

would find this activity to be more worthwhile as participants would learn more about character

strengths that they normally do not use. However, this study was still intriguing and supports

past research.

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