

PRESENCE WORK. POSITIVE WORK

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ABSTRACT

In this Unit, we describe the next 2 types of intervention arising out of the extended consultation. Presence work deals with the integration of our spirituality with the state of our physical body and brain. It focuses on a consciousness of here, not somewhere else, and in the present, not in the past or the future. Presence work can involve the practice of meditation, spiritual disciplines, and meaningful involvement in life and approach. It can also involve humanistic, existential, redintegration and experiential work of therapy. Positive work deals with promoting positive mental health experiences. It hinges on helping our patients lead three “happy” lives – the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life. We can use positive psychotherapy exercises to help our patients develop skills that promote mental resilience and health. The positive approach can also be usefully incorporated into the other three psychological approaches of problem work, pattern work, and presence work.

Keywords: Presence work; Now in time; here in space; Positive work; Pleasant life; Good life; Meaningful life.

SFP2018; 44(1) : 19-21

INTRODUCTION

Presence work focuses on the state of our consciousness of the here and now, in space and time. You could say that we aim to be here, not there, and in the now, or the present, not the past or the future. In presence work, we focus on this moment and this state. We don't dwell on the past or look at future possibilities. This contrasts with **problem** work which deals with a situation within a period of time, and **pattern** work, which is about stories of various situations linked by themes.

Positive work promotes positive mental health and buffers negative experiences. It hinges on helping our patients lead three “happy” lives — the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life. We can use positive psychotherapy exercises to help our patients develop skills that promote mental resilience and health. The positive approach can also be incorporated into the other three psychological interventions.

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PRESENCE WORK

When Can We Use It?

Presence work is often used to find a balance between our spiritual self, or our spirituality, and our physical body and brain. Spirituality refers to the facets of our relationship with a higher being or higher cause, which gives meaning to our lives, and is not necessarily a reference to a practice of religion. An atheist who seeks meaning to life is grappling with aspects of his own spirituality. Reflective communication skills are often used in presence work.

Now in Time

Mindfulness, although an over-used term, is a useful way to refer to the process of focusing our psychological attention on what is going on in the present moment. There are different ways to attain mindfulness.

One is to intentionally direct attention, by maintaining focus. The opposite way is not to focus on any explicit object but to be open and attentive to whatever arises in experience from moment to moment. This is also called watchful awareness. Others direct attention and then let go of the object of attention and rest in open awareness¹.

Here in Space

Therapies that work on here are characterised by respect for the client's subjective experience. Therapists trust their clients to make constructive choices to balance their psychological and physical processes. Broadly, there are four groups:

- **Humanistic** work is based on the belief that each of us can realise our full potential through finding positive meaning in our lives²;
- **Existential** work addresses anxieties that arise from having to create our identity in a world that lacks an intrinsic meaning³;
- **Redintegration** work seeks to “redintegrate”, and not just re-integrate. It seeks to restore to wholeness, rather than simply address component parts⁴; and
- **Experiential** work encourages patients to bring subconscious issues into awareness through experiences such as guided imagery and role play⁵.

POSITIVE WORK

There are three categories of positive work. The first revolves around three “happy” lives as described by Martin Seligman of

the University of **Pennsylvania**⁶. These lives, seeking to build the happiness store in each of us, form the key contribution to positive psychology. The second gives a positive spin to pattern, problem, and presence work. The third category is positive psychological hygiene.

Three Happy Lives

The three happy lives of positive psychology are the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life.

The Pleasant Life

The pleasant life focuses on **positive emotions**, to have as many pleasures as possible. Negative emotions can have a damaging effect. These emotions include dissatisfaction with life as well as low moods when we reflect on our lot in life, and often involve negative automatic thoughts (see Unit 5). Living the pleasant life consists of generating positive emotions about the present, the past, and the future, and learning the skills to amplify the intensity and duration of these emotions (Seligman et al, 2006).

The Good Life

The good life includes several concepts such as flow, self-efficacy, and personal effectiveness.

Flow is the term we use for the psychological state that accompanies highly engaging activities. It was first used by a Hungarian psychologist, **Csikszentmihályi**. When we are in a state of flow, our attention is completely focused on the activity, time passes quickly and the sense of self is lost⁷.

Self-efficacy and **personal effectiveness** refer to the belief that our ability to accomplish a task and make a difference is a function of our personal effort. Adopting and maintaining a healthy lifestyle is an example of high self-efficacy leading to positive change.

The Meaningful Life

We live a meaningful life when we use our talents to serve something, or some institution, that we believe is bigger than we are. There are several such positive institutions, including family, religion, politics, community, and nation.

Giving Things a Positive Spin

The positive approach can be used independently or synergistically with the other approaches.

Combining CBT principles with positive work can help the patient go beyond the **problematic** situation to building resilience. Positive automatic thoughts are generated instead of NATs⁸.

Within the **pattern** approach, **solution-focused brief therapy** avoids focusing on past problems. Instead, it seeks to

induce hopes and positive feelings for the present and the future⁹.

With **presence** work, deliberately paying attention to elements of our immediate experience can reduce stress and anxiety. This also counters daydreaming, which is related to a reduction of happiness.

Positive Psychological Hygiene

Having adequate **sleep** and physical and **mental** relaxation, enjoying healthy meals and eating in moderation, participating in regular physical and spiritual **activities**, nurturing **relationships** with family, friends and colleagues, and avoiding **toxicity** in the form of tobacco and indiscriminate alcohol use, unsafe sex, and gambling, are important for psychological hygiene. These can be conveniently remembered as **SMART** steps to a healthier lifestyle.

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LEARNING POINTS ON PRESENCE WORK

- **Presence work deals with the integration of our spirituality with the state of our physical body and brain.**
- **It focuses on a consciousness of here, not somewhere else, and the present, not the past or the future.**
- **Presence work can involve the practice of meditation, spiritual disciplines, and meaningful involvement in life and approach.**
- **It can also involve the humanistic, existential, reintegration, and experiential work of therapy.**

LEARNING POINTS ON POSITIVE WORK

- **Positive work promotes positive mental health and buffers negative experiences.**
 - **It hinges on helping our patients lead three “happy” lives — the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life.**
 - **We can use positive psychotherapy exercises to help our patients develop skills that promote mental resilience and health.**
 - **The positive approach can also be incorporated into the other three psychological approaches.**
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