

PRESENCE APPROACH & POSITIVE APPROACH

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6A. PRESENCE APPROACH

ABSTRACT

Presence approach 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.

Keywords: Now in time; here in space

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INTRODUCTION

In the **presence approach**, time and space are frozen in this moment and state. We do not dwell on the past or look at future possibilities. This differs from the **problem approach** (see the second half of this article), which deals with a situation within a period of time, and the **pattern approach** (refer to Unit 5), which is about stories of situations linked by themes.

H.E.R.E IN SPACE

Presence approach uses techniques to capture the moment in space and time. Techniques that can be used are from established schools of psychotherapy and from religious traditions and can be remembered using the acronym **HERE** in space – Humanistic, Existential, Redintegration, and Experiential, as seen in **Table 1**. You could say that we aim to be *here*, in the present – not there, not the past, not the future.

The past is memory. The future is anticipation. We cannot travel back or forwards in time. However, we can use techniques of mindfulness to access the flow of time in the present and being mindful of *now* in time. In other words, we strive to have a present-focus, and try to minimise dwelling on past failures or future uncertainties. Being here is just as important, because we are finite beings grounded in a physical location.

The presence approach is often practised to attain balance between our spiritual self, or our spirituality, and our physical body and brain. By spirituality, we refer to the facets of our relationship with a higher being or higher cause, which give meaning to our lives. This 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.

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, conscious choices to balance their psychological and physical processes. Broadly, there are four approaches that can be remembered by the acronym **HERE**:

- **Humanistic** approaches are based on the belief that each of us can realise our full potential through finding positive meaning in our lives.
- **Existential** approaches address our anxieties that arise from having to create our identity and finding our purpose in a world that lacks an intrinsic meaning.
- **Redintegration** approaches seek to “redintegrate”, and not just reintegrate. They seek to restore to wholeness, rather than simply address component parts.
- **Experiential** approaches encourage patients to bring subconscious issues into awareness through experiences such as guided imagery and roleplaying.

Table 1. HERE in Space

HERE	Examples of applications	Pioneers
Humanistic	Person-Centred Therapy Motivational Interview	Carl Rogers, Miller & Rollnick
Existential	Logo & other therapies	Viktor Frankl, Irwin Yalom
Redintegration	Gestalt Therapy	Fritz Perls
Experiential	Psychodrama Experiential Learning Cycle	Jacob Moreno David A Kolb

Source: *The Extended Consultation*, Second Edition, 2024: Page 132

Humanistic Approach

Carl Rogers developed Person-Centred Therapy based on the client himself as the agent of change. It seeks to bring the client to a position where he trusts himself, is open to experience, can self-evaluate, and has a willingness to continue growing. This is a process commonly referred to as self-actualisation. There is no specific technique in this approach. The therapist guides and engages the client by congruence and accurate empathic understanding and communicates this to the client by “unconditional positive regard” and acceptance. The therapy is non-directive and provides an environment for self-growth, acceptance, and integration.

Motivational Interviewing (MI), developed by William Miller and Stephen Rollnick, is based on the principles of unconditional positive regard and is used to navigate readiness or ambivalence to change. MI places emphasis on the client’s self-responsibility and creating an invitational style for cooperation between the client and therapist to generate alternative solutions to behavioural problems. MI therapists avoid confronting or arguing with the client and avoid viewing clients as opponents. Rather, therapists listen reflectively and clients are treated with empathy (unconditional positive regard).

Prochaska and DiClemente developed the transtheoretical Stages of Change model and mapped the change processes as moving through five stages: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance.

Existential Approach

The existential approach believes that as human beings, we can reflect on and decide the way we want to live. However, awareness of this freedom can lead to existential anxiety, or anxiety relating to our very existence. This is because there may be no certainty of the correctness of the outcome of our choice. This anxiety is heightened by the established facts of the lives of mortal beings, i.e., sickness, suffering, and death.

By raising awareness of the client’s anxieties and the ways in which these might be constricting his choices of acting, the therapist makes him more aware of how his self is defined. He is helped to arrive at alternative choices and action.

Irvin Yalom dwells on directly addressing our fears of death, or our “death anxieties”. An example of successfully facing death anxieties is the experience of some cancer patients, who describe their feeling that they are living more fully, after they have faced the initial numbness of their diagnosis.

Viktor Frankl, another existential psychotherapist, based his therapy on helping a client deliberately define a meaning in his life. Frankl was interned in the Auschwitz concentration camp during the Second World War. There, he observed that the severely debilitated prisoners who could find a meaning in their unfounded suffering survived. Those who lost hope died. He reiterated Friedrich Nietzsche’s insight that “*those who have a why to live can bear with almost any how.*”

Frankl lists three ways to help clients discover the meaning of their own life:

- By creating a work or doing a deed, the client possesses a sense of achievement or accomplishment. This can be done through hobbies, working, and even expressing one’s creativity.
- Next, to experience something or encounter someone. To simply experience or encounter nature, beauty, culture, truth, goodness, and love guides clients in awakening a deeper sense of purpose.
- The last way to discover the meaning of life is by one’s attitude towards unavoidable suffering. In the midst of hardship, challenges, and adversity, finding meaning through their suffering, pain, and sacrifices can give individuals courage and fulfilment.

Both these approaches are a celebration of man’s ability to rise above existential uncertainty and anxiety.

Redintegration Approach

No, the word is not a typographical error!

Redintegration raises awareness of every part of one’s self, even those parts that are hidden or disenfranchised, and of owning all the disparate parts. Redintegration refers to the restoration of the whole, from discovering and re-owning hidden or disenfranchised parts, and not merely the reintegration of parts that have been separated or removed. The term *impasse* has been used to describe the hidden or disenfranchised parts.

A well-known example is *Gestalt Therapy* from the German *gestalt*, which refers to the whole, as being greater than the sum of its parts. Clients are helped to become aware of what they are doing, how they are doing it, how they feel and change, and to accept and value what they are. Through perceiving, feeling, and acting, the client experiences wholeness in space.

Bill Clinton, the former President of the United States, famously denied engaging in sexual indiscretion with a young female intern, even in the face of DNA evidence. It was a disregard for this reckless part of his personality that had led him to indulge in the sexual indiscretion in the first instance. His predecessor Jimmy Carter, on the other hand, who publicly confessed that he had “*committed adultery in my heart, many times*” was probably less vulnerable when sexually tempted, because he had acknowledged and accepted this weakness.

Experiential Approach

Psychodrama uses methods of enactment, group dynamics, and roleplay to evoke changes in individuals and groups and to enable new perceptions to develop. Its purpose is to resolve conflicts and gain insight through action rather than talk alone. Jacob Moreno was a pioneer in utilising psychodrama, often on groups.

A back-to-nature movement focused on human potential, the mind-body connection, and personal awareness has developed since the 1960s, based at the Esalen Institute in California. The pervasive ideas related to mindfulness, such as personal growth and spirituality, yoga and meditation, encounter groups and retreats, can be traced to this institute and its programmes.

NOW IN TIME

The term **mindfulness** has become tired from fashionable overuse. Nevertheless, it remains a useful way to reflect now-in-time, and refers to the process of focusing our psychological attention on what is going on in the present moment. We can neither go back nor travel forward in time. Therefore, we can only focus on the now-in-time, through different ways to attain mindfulness, via **Now techniques**.

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 awareness.

Different religious and spiritual traditions follow different paths to mindfulness and use different terms to describe the processes and the states reached. A Benedictine monk, Father Laurence Freeman, uses the states of silence, stillness and simplicity to describe the outcomes of meditation. The psychological processes of focused attention, intention, and dissociation are used to attain these three states of the mind. Deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, and guided imagery are secular techniques used to achieve the same ends.

State of Silence, or Silencing the Mind

The focused attention of deep breathing is used to achieve a state of silence. This state is reached when external perceptions of sight, smell, sound, and touch, and internal perceptions of thoughts and feelings, are nullified to allow new insights and awareness to emerge.

State of Stillness, or Stilling the Mind

One way to still the mind is to use the focused intention of chanting on a sacred sound, or a mantra. Examples from religious traditions include the Christian *maranatha* (Aramaic for "Come, Lord") and the Hindu *om* or *aum*, derived from Sanskrit.

A secular parallel is found in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) practice. One of the steps of the AA programme espouses the filling of the mind by a higher spiritual order.

In the Buddhist tradition, the notion is to empty the mind. A bottle, totally filled or totally empty, will be silent and still when shaken. Only a partially filled bottle will make a sloshing sound. Emptying and filling are thus directly opposite disciplines to attain inner stillness.

Having a focus on the present helps us to achieve an inner state of harmony of our mind processes, or stillness, which is detached from the constantly changing nature of our world. We can therefore move beyond our anxieties, begin learning from and accepting the past, and look to a future hope and optimism.

State of Simplicity, or Being

Freeman uses this phrase to describe dissociation, which is a psychological detachment of our senses from the immediate surroundings. Besides the chanting of a mantra, guided imagery is another technique used to attain the state. This dissociated state is also induced in *hypnotherapy* as an a-volitional experience, with or without an a-volitional response.

POSTSCRIPT

The presence approach is an artificial construct that helps patients to be physically here-in-space and now-in-time. It seems paradoxical to discuss the presence approach in disparate parts, when the experience of here-and-now is necessarily the experience of an entire whole. In reality, time and space is/are one.

CASE STUDY

The Presence Approach on Dorothy

Dorothy was first referred to her university's counsellors to work on her Intermittent Explosive Disorder. The university counsellor initially took on a comforting role (see Chapter 7 of *The Extended Consultation*, Second Edition on therapeutic roles), while using a Humanitarian Rogerian Technique to counsel her. This worked temporarily and Dorothy discovered that she would still be triggered.

Later, Dorothy was referred to Dr Lim, who first used the problem approach to challenge her cognitive distortions regarding various situations such as her "Mum and the hamsters" (refer to Unit 4). These helped her realise that her pattern of thinking of acting like the family's glue was unhelpful.

Dorothy was later taught breathing exercises to help deal with her IED in order to be here in space and now in time.

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LEARNING POINTS

- **The presence approach deals with the integration of the spiritual aspects of our self, or our spirituality, with the functioning of our physical body and brain.**
 - **It focuses on a consciousness of here-in-space and now-in-time. We strive to be here, not there, and in the present, not in the past or the future.**
 - **It can also involve humanistic, existential, redintegration, and experiential approaches of therapy to get us to *here* in space.**
 - **The presence approach can involve the practice of meditation, spiritual disciplines, and meaningful involvement in life and work, to bring us into *now* in time.**
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6B. POSITIVE APPROACH

ABSTRACT

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: Pleasant life; Good life; Meaningful life

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INTRODUCTION

“Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success. If you love what you are doing, you will be successful.”

– Albert Schweitzer, winner of the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize, 1875-1965

In 1998, the American psychologist, Martin Seligman^{1,2} and his colleagues introduced the positive psychology approach. This approach seeks to “*catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities.*” Seligman defines this approach as one that “*seeks to understand and build the factors that allow individuals, communities, and societies to flourish.*”

Conceptually, the positive psychology approach centres around three “happy” lives. These lives, seeking to build the happiness store in each of us, form the key contribution that this approach has made to psychology. Besides positive psychology, the positive approach includes giving a positive spin to the pattern, problem, and presence approaches, and positive psychological hygiene.

THE THREE PRINCIPLES OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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

The Pleasant Life

The pleasant life focuses on positive emotions, in order to have as many pleasures as possible. When negative emotions dominate, they have a damaging effect on our lives. These include dissatisfaction with life, negative automatic thoughts, and low moods when we reflect on our lot in life.

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.¹

Positive emotions about the past are: satisfaction, contentment, fulfilment, pride, and serenity. Positive emotions about the future are: hope and optimism, faith, trust, and confidence. These emotions, especially hope and optimism, help to buffer a person from depression.

Positive emotions about the present include satisfaction from immediate pleasures as we try to savour experiences that we otherwise often rush through. One strategy to encourage such positive emotions is to count our blessings. As an exercise, write down three things that went well today. Take some time to tell them to a partner, colleague, or friend explaining why each item has been selected.

The Good Life

The good life has several concepts such as flow, self-efficacy, and personal effectiveness, and values. We can usefully cultivate these positive personal traits to result in a happy life.

Flow is the term we use for the psychological state that accompanies highly engaging activities. It was first used by a Hungarian psychologist, Csikszentmihályi.³ 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 lost (in a positive way).

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.

Seligman proposes that one way to live meaningfully is first to identify our highest talents, which he calls **signature strengths**.⁴ Each of us has certain things that we do particularly well and enjoy doing. We could learn practical strategies to identify and use these signature strengths more.

One way to do this is to write down an account of a time when we were at our best. We can use this to identify our personal strengths, and when we recount this to other people, they can add their reflections to our insight.

We use our signature strengths to contribute to our self-development as well as to development of our community. **Accomplishments** and **achievements** refer to what we bring about, using our signature strengths, in our personal circumstances. **Mastery** refers to our ability to use our signature strengths to make sterling contributions to the institutions we belong to.

When we use meaning to transform our perceptions of our circumstances, from unfortunate to fortunate, we achieve the greatest benefits.¹

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL HYGIENE – S.M.A.R.T STEPS

Having adequate, good quality **sleep**, enjoying healthy **meals**, participating in regular physical and spiritual **activities**, nurturing **relationships**, and avoiding **toxicity** are important for psychological hygiene. These can be conveniently remembered as **SMART** steps to a healthier lifestyle.

To have adequate and good quality **sleep**, adults above 18 years old should get at least seven hours of sleep. Following a consistent bedtime routine such as listening to relaxing music and avoiding electronic devices can help the mind and body wind down.

Healthy **meals** incorporate a quarter-plate of wholegrains, a quarter-plate of protein, and a half-plate of fruit and vegetables. We should also choose foods low in sodium and sugar content and always consume foods in moderation and appropriate portions.

We should participate in regular physical **activity**. The goal is for 150-300 minutes of exercise per week. Spiritual **activities** are important to maintaining good positive psychology. These can include prayer, meditation, chanting, or other forms of spiritual engagement tailored to the individual.

Through nurturing **relationships** with family, friends, and colleagues, we create a positive environment that provides a sense of belonging and promote emotional well-being.

Avoiding **toxicity** or vices in the form of tobacco, indiscriminate alcohol use, unsafe sex, gambling, or other unhealthy activities and behaviour improves psychological hygiene.

DOROTHY & THE POSITIVE APPROACH

For Dorothy, Dr Lim roleplayed as her family members to rehearse with Dorothy her responses to different situations. The roleplay was done in an attempt to create a positive situation with her parents.

For example, Dr Lim played the role of her father who responded to her father's suggestion that they go to a spa. Instead of disagreeing with her father, Dorothy readily persuaded her mother to go along as a family, and they actually enjoyed the session.

Another example was when Dorothy arranged a dinner for the family with her wheelchair-bound grandmother to engender a positive experience. Dorothy later feedbacked that the dinner was indeed a pleasant experience for her family.

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LEARNING POINTS

- **The positive approach promotes positive mental health and buffers negative experiences.**
 - **This approach 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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