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Happy Days: Positive Psychology interventions effects on affect in an N-of-1 trial



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Abstract Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) have been suggested as self-help tools to increase subjective well-being and happiness. However, most previous studies have been based on between-group comparisons, which are not informative with regard to trajectories of individual change over time. This study is a first attempt at examining whether completing frequently used PPIs — 'Three Good Things in Life', 'Using Signature Strengths in a New Way' and 'Gratitude Visit' — results in consistent changes in affect at the level of the individual. In an N-of-1-study design, participants were randomly allocated to one of six counterbalanced patterns of the PPIs over a 9–10 week period. The affective aspect of subjective well-being was measured daily using the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS). Hierarchical linear modelling showed significant changes in PANAS scores, but no statistically significant differential impact on positive affect of the PPIs, apart from a marginally significant time × intervention interaction for 'Using Signature Strengths in a New Way'. This suggests that frequently used PPIs do not result in changes in affect over time. This finding questions recommending the use of PPIs as self-help tools.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Afecto positivo;
intervenciones de Psicología Positiva;
bienestar subjetivo;
modelos multinivel;
estudio cuasi-experimental

Efectos de las intervenciones de la Psicología Positiva en el afecto en un ensayo N = 1

Resumen Las intervenciones de la Psicología Positiva (IPP) se han sugerido como herramientas de autoayuda para aumentar el bienestar subjetivo y la felicidad. Sin embargo, la mayoría de los estudios previos se ha basado en comparaciones entre grupos que no informan del cambio individual en el tiempo. Este estudio es un primer intento de examinar si las IPP habitualmente empleadas "Tres cosas buenas de la vida", "Uso de las fortalezas características de un modo distinto" y "Visita de gratitud" provocan cambios en el afecto a nivel individual. En un diseño N = 1, los participantes fueron asignados al azar a uno de los seis patrones contrabalanceados de las IPP durante 9-10 semanas. El aspecto afectivo del bienestar subjetivo se midió diariamente usando la Escala de Afecto Positivo y Afecto Negativo (PANAS). El modelo jerárquico lineal

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mostró cambios estadísticamente significativos en las puntuaciones PANAS, pero ningún efecto diferencial estadísticamente significativo en el afecto positivo, excepto la interacción tiempo x intervención para “fortalezas características”. Los resultados sugieren que las IPP empleadas habitualmente no provocan cambios en el afecto a lo largo del tiempo. Este hallazgo cuestiona el uso de las IPP como herramientas de autoayuda.

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Positive psychology interventions (PPIs) to increase subjective well-being (SWB) and decrease depressive symptoms are becoming increasingly popular (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). In particular, the exercises outlined in Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson’s seminal paper (2005) have enjoyed considerable popularity, and it has been suggested to use these interventions more widely (Rashid, 2015; Rashid & Seligman, 2013; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). However, the current evidence base for the effects of PPIs is mixed, with effect sizes ranging from substantial (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005) to negligible (Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012). In addition, the effects of PPIs if used on a large scale (Challen, Machin, & Gillham, 2014; Coyne, 2013), the general validity of claims in some domains of positive psychology (Brown, Sokal, & Friedman, 2013) and general concepts (Fernández-Ríos & Novo, 2012) warrant more stringent studies and critical examination of PPIs. In order to inform evidence-based practice in the use of PPIs as self-help tools or even clinical practice, more and better-controlled trials of the effects of PPIs are needed. In this paper, we provide a first-ever evaluation of individual-level effects of PPIs.

Between-groups and N-of-1 studies of subjective well-being

Previous studies of the effects of PPIs (Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012; Seligman et al., 2005, 2006) have examined between-group differences in SWB. For example, compared to a control group, participants completing a *Three Good Things* exercise had significantly higher levels of happiness and significantly lower levels of depression over time (Seligman et al., 2005). However, even if between-groups tests of effects support one intervention over a control condition or another intervention, there might be substantial variance within each intervention group, and participants might not all equally profit from, or respond to, each intervention (Ottenbacher, 1990, 1992). In other words, patterns found in between-group comparisons might not be observed at the level of individuals (Molenaar & Campbell, 2009). To address this, it has been suggested that research rather focus on individual changes in SWB to evaluate positive psychology interventions (Eid & Diener, 1999).

N-of-1-designs have advantages over between-groups designs. N-of-1 designs allow the examination of individual change in SWB, which means that recognizable clinical changes are emphasized (Barbot & Perchec, 2015).

Furthermore, the delivery mode of the interventions captures some aspects of typical clinical interactions, namely the personalized delivery and the continued interaction with the experimenter. Similarly, N-of-1 designs are the preferable option when studying the effects of interventions that need repeated application such as the PPIs, which had to be applied on a daily basis. A common misconception regarding n-of-1 study designs is that only one subject is used in each study; more commonly multiple subjects are used to emphasize the strength and replicability of the intervention (Tervo, Estrem, Bryson-Brockmann, & Symons, 2003). In this study, each participant received multiple interventions, which were applied in counterbalanced order.

Increasing subjective well-being. Implications of PPIs

Seligman et al. (2005) used an internet-based study to examine the effect of five “happiness exercises” on happiness and depression over a six-month period. The five exercises were based on Authentic Happiness Theory (Seligman, 2002), which proposes that happiness can be increased by exercises that foster enjoyment, meaning, and engagement. These PPIs required participants to identify character strengths that defined themselves (*Identifying Signature Strengths*), to use these personal strengths in a novel way (*Using Signature Strengths in A New Way*), to focus on three good things that happened each day (*Three Good Things in Life*), to visit someone who had been kind to the participant, with the purpose of delivering, in person, a letter of appreciation (*Gratitude Visit*), or to write about a time when they were at their best and to reflect on the signature strengths that were highlighted by the description (*You At Your Best*). In particular, the two interventions *Using Signature Strengths in A New Way* and *Three Good Things in Life* were associated with increases in happiness and decreases in depression up to six months later. Similar results were reported in two smaller face-to-face studies (Seligman et al., 2006). A replication of the original study found substantially smaller effect sizes (Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012). These inconsistencies suggest that further research is needed, and as the application of PPIs grows, and treatment programs are developed (Rashid & Seligman, 2013), it is essential to validate the efficacy of the techniques on which such therapy programs are based.

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