

**Positive Psychology and Performance Excellence in Sport, Performance, and Life**

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## **Introduction**

Coaches and consultants can also benefit from incorporating the following positive psychology principles. Positive psychology looks at what is right with people, focuses on when people are at their best, and attends to individual and group flourishing; Positive psychology is not the focus of the positive at the expense of the negative, as it also recognizes negative emotions, failures, problems, and other unpleasant aspects as a natural and important aspects of life; Positively psychology is first and foremost a science. As such it is principally concerned with evidence, measurement, and testing...It is also an applied science, and there is common understanding that research results will lead to the creation of real-world interventions that lead to improvements in different aspects of life; by providing interventions that promote superior functioning (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

### **Positive Psychology and its Role in Performance Excellence and Overall Well-Being**

Positive psychology is best framed as having basic tenets, rather than a complex functional model of its inner workings, including the following understandings that humans have an innate drive to grow, change, and overcome; focusing on strengths is powerful, or more powerful, than focusing on weaknesses to achieve success; positivity-whether in the form of emotion or hope-is a powerful resource for facilitating change and achieving success; attention must be paid to both positive and negative aspects of life in order to address the complete client; and scientifically derived knowledge and assessments give professionals unique ways of understanding clients and coaching (Biswas-Diener, 2010). The preceding highlights the principles that are unique to positive psychology.

Positive psychology coaching offers a specific and sophisticated means for focusing assets, talents, and other sources of success that includes empirically validated assessments, theory about the origins and benefits of strengths use, and stratagems and language for identifying, developing, and employing individual strengths (Biswas-Diener, 2010). While other coaching, including life coaching focuses on talents and other sources of positive success to support clients, positive psychology coaching uses empirically validated assessments and unique language specific to the client and field to support clients in the application of their strengths to support them (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

Another distinctive feature of positive psychology coaching is attention to positive affect (Biswas-Diener, 2010). For example, while most coaching focuses on the positive emotions to support the clients, positive psychology recognizes the value of understanding there is a time and a place for this positive emotion, and sometimes stepping into the heavier side of experiences, including sadness and frustration, clients can be approached as whole individuals who experience many different things, which has the potential to support them and empower their motivations (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Positive psychology coaching is an empowering method of supporting individuals with unique philosophies and scientific applications (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

Positive psychology applies such theories of Maslow's hierarchy of needs in the achievement of performance excellence and overall well-being. Understanding and applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides a coaching environment that allows individuals to move up the levels to reach self-actualization and effectively reach their successes (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Maslow's hierarchy of needs includes first meeting the physiological needs (i.e., the basic

needs that the individual needs to function). These involve the basics of overall health, including proper sleep, balanced nutrition, hydration, and proper skill development and conditioning (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Without the basics, one is lacking in their foundation to support them to continue to develop to their full potential and any attempt to progress beyond, will result in potential setbacks, mental and physical (i.e., hindering them from reaching their potential) (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

After meeting an individuals' physiological needs, safety needs need to be met (Biswas-Diener, 2010). The safety needs include the basic support for an individual, including the coach and support staff (i.e., how are they supporting the athletes psychological and physical needs as they progress in their sport) (Biswas-Diener, 2010). If coaches are not supportive on all levels of development, athletes are not going to progress to the next level, as they lack a sense of belonging and the relationships that support them (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

After meeting the physiological and safety needs, the Belongingness and love needs need to be addressed (Biswas-Diener, 2010). These needs refer to the relationships in the individuals' lives that they need to support them (e.g., family, friends, and comradery that individuals feel from their teammates, which are ultimately fostered by their coaches) (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Coaches and support staff can also fit into the sense of belongingness, if athletes do not feel valued by their coaches, they are not going to progress as easily to fill their esteem needs at the next level (Biswas-Diener, 2010). The esteem needs must to be met, to reach self-actualization (Biswas-Diener, 2010). The esteem needs involve individual achievements and feeling a sense of accomplishment in their skill development as well as their attainment of their goals (Biswas-Diener, 2010). When individuals meet their physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness needs,

and esteem needs, they have the sense of competence, confidence, and support that allows them to achieve their full potential (i.e., self-actualization) (Biswas-Diener, 2010). A strengths-based focus is also associated with the achievement of self-actualization in individuals, ultimately supporting optimal performance outcomes (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

Positive psychology also emphasizes how individuals can benefit from the power of understanding their values, and how that awareness has the potential to support them in achieving performance excellence (Biswas-Diener, 2010). According to Biswas-Diener (2010), values are an individual's personal beliefs and ideals that they believe are important that serve as a guide for making decisions and evaluating the behavior of others. Values are the product of genetics, family upbringing, the culture in which an individual was raised, and their unique experiences as they go through life (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Assisting individuals in understanding their values more clearly, can help them to make decisions that support them in maximizing their individual growth, ultimately allowing them to achieve greater performance success (Biswas-Diener, 2010). For example, individuals can benefit from completing a personal values survey (Biswas-Diener, 2010, 95-96).

The personal values survey can be used to increase an individuals' self-awareness and to open conversations with clients about how they go about the business of fulfilling these values or how they use these values to guide their decisions...the personal values survey can also be used to identify potential sources of values conflict, either within clients or between clients and those with whom they interact" (Biswas-Diener, 2010). The preceding information can help the coach and individuals to maximize their potential with the awareness of their significant beliefs that drive their decisions and actions (Biswas-Diener, 2010). In addition, the preceding will improve

coach and team cohesion and ensure that the environment is conducive to everyone's individuality, and ultimately overall success, including acknowledging and addressing any value incongruencies (Biswas-Diener, 2010)

Positive psychology also provides coaches and individuals with the understandings of the importance of being mindful of the use of labels, as well as the value of implementing of assessments for providing further understanding to support overall success (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Labels can place people into conceptual "boxes" that restrict creativity or a multifaceted sense of self (Biswas-Diener 2010). The alternative to using labels is by referring to people as individuals that possess different facets of themselves that support them in their individual success (Biswas-Diener, 2010). For example, one way of avoiding the label trap is by thinking about personal attributes as being "dimensional" rather than being "categorical" (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Conveying to individuals that attributes are on a continuum and are areas of growth and potential, empowers individuals with a sense of potential and growth, supporting the achievement of performance excellence (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

Implementing empirically validated assessments supports performance success in the following ways. Assessments are effective because they encourage people to give their honest answers, as they are perceived as official, they are designed to be easily understood therefore there is little confusion when providing answers, and they cover a specific topic effectively by providing numerous questions that can create the clearest understanding (Biswas-Diener, 2010). The preceding information then provides a clear framework to further discuss the information to support an individual most effectively in performance success (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

Positive psychology can help individuals in poor mental health that is impacting on their performance by providing them with the tools and awareness to approach their sport and performance with a healthier, more supportive mindset (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Positive psychology helps individuals to develop more awareness of their experiences, values, perspectives, and strengths, using assessments, questionnaires, and discussions, allowing them to have access to their inner resources that have the capacity to support them in overcoming poor mental health (Biswas-Diener, 2010). The inner resources revealed by positive psychology approaches has the capacity to support individuals in overcoming poor mental health, by providing them with a different perspective and more resilience, so their poor mental health does not seem insurmountable, and they are more easily able to overcome their poor mental health and improve their performance (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

“The goal of positive psychology is to make normal life more fulfilling... and asks the questions, “What is right with you?” (Test Prep Guru, 2012). By focusing on what is “right” with an individual, positive psychology enhances their positive perspective of their capacities, which has the potential to support them in overcoming poor mental health and improving their performances (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Test Prep Guru, 2012). Positive psychology also focuses on the benefits of practicing gratitude (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Gratitude has the potential to help individuals to overcome poor mental health in the following ways (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004).

According to Seligman (2004), practicing gratitude, such as by reflecting on an experience with a person and taking the time to thank them, allowing the individual to increase their sense of belonging and engagement, which are integral aspects of a person’s sense of happiness. When individuals improve their sense of belonging and happiness, they increase their

sense of resilience and enhance their interpersonal relationships, which are essential in combating poor mental health (Seligman, 2004; Biswas-Diener, 2010). The effects of gratitude, when practiced daily can be almost the same as medications (Chowdhury, 2020). Gratitude produces a feeling of long-lasting happiness and contentment, the physiological basis of which lies at the neurotransmitter level (Chowdhury, 2020). When individuals express gratitude and receive the same, their brain releases dopamine and serotonin, the two crucial neurotransmitters responsible for positive emotions that make them feel ‘good’ (Chowdhury, 2020). When individuals feel better, as a result of practicing gratitude, they can more easily focus on the positive feelings and experiences around them, which reinforces a sense of optimism and gives them the opportunity to have greater performance success with the greater awareness of their internal and external resources to support them (Chowdhury, 2020; Biswas-Diener, 2010).

In addition, as highlighted in Biswas-Diener (2010), “Identifying your strengths is associated with higher happiness and lower rates of depression...Using your strengths consciously over the course of a week is associated with higher happiness and lower rates of depression” (Biswas-Diener, 2010, p. 32). In addition to the benefit of happiness resulting from building your strengths and repairing weaknesses, they also have the potential to increase people’s energy. As mentioned in Biswas-Diener (2010), “Energy is a hallmark of strengths. When people use or discuss their strengths’ they tend to experience a burst of enthusiasm.” (Biswas-Diener, 2010, p. 22). When an individual identifies and applies their strengths, it decreases the rates of depression (i.e., poor mental health) and increases an individuals’ energy and happiness, improving their capacity to perform successfully with the awareness of their potential, greater optimism, and resources to support them in performance (Biswas-Diener, 2010).



The optimism that is developed and/or reinforced from the principles and practices of positive psychology, allows individuals the opportunity to believe in their strengths more readily, increasing their sense of confidence in what they are able to produce with their thoughts and actions, which are oriented around their strengths and abilities (Biswas-Diener, 2010). When individuals focus on their strengths and abilities it has the potential to enhance resilience to overcome poor mental health and, in turn, improve their performance, as they are focused on what is possible for them and how capable they are to not only overcome their adversity, but perform at their best with the use of their strengths (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

When individuals are more focused on what they are capable of because of a strengths-based mindset, it breeds that optimism, limiting their capacity to focus on the negatives and/or our limitations, often associated with poor mental health (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Weinberg & Gould, 2015). When individuals focus on their strengths and what is possible for them, they are less susceptible to succumbing to unhealthy psychological disorders, such as depression and anxiety (Biswas-Diener, 2010). When individuals focus on what they are capable of they open the door to possibilities, which can enhance our performance (Biswas-Diener, 2010). In contrast, when individuals fill their thoughts with doubts and negative thinking it closes their mind and interferes with their ability to perform at their best, ultimately impeding their performance (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

While these preceding methods can support optimal mental health, it is integral that professionals “refer on” to the deficit model and refer clients appropriately to professionals who address mental health challenges to efficaciously address the psychological challenges an individual might be confronted with in their sport, performance, or life (Biswas-Diener, 2010). For instance, if a person is showing signs of being challenged with clinical depression, it would

be integral that coaches and consultants gather as much information in order to best support them (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Further, if a person is suffering from clinical depression, revealing features or language referencing suicide ideation, it is essential that coaches and consultants healthfully connect them with a clinical, licensed professional who specializes in supporting individuals with such challenges, to ensure their safety and well-being (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

Positive psychology can play a role with an injured athlete during every step of injury including rehabilitation and post-traumatic recovery in the following ways. Positive psychology can support an injured athlete by redirecting their focus on what is “right” with them as opposed to what is “wrong” with them (Biswas-Diener, 2010). For instance, while they may have broken their ankle, which is certainly disappointing, they can focus on the fact that they have a healthy body that is designed to repair itself with appropriate care and rest (Biswas-Diener, 2010). They can practice gratitude (i.e., a principle of positive psychology), including recognizing the other areas of their life that they are fortunate (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004). For example, while they may have an injury preventing them from playing their sport, they now have more time to dedicate to other aspects of their lives including different friends or other hobbies that they may have had less time for while they were so busy in sports (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004).

The preceding would allow the athlete to experience other areas of fulfillment and meaning, while they are unable to perform in their sport, which can add to their resilience as they healthfully recover from their injury with the support of their interpersonal relationships (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004). Further, with a sense of gratitude athletes can look at their experience as a lesson to learn and the opportunity to come back even stronger, such as

through the discovery of more supportive conditioning and training methods to prevent future injury.

Positive psychology with its emphasis on strengths supports the development of optimism, which is the belief in a favorable outcome (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004). By emphasizing the idea of a favorable outcome, athletes can keep an optimistic outlook on a full or appropriate recovery to return to their sport and life in other fulfilling ways (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004). As highlighted, positive psychology puts an emphasis on strengths, by focusing on their strengths, athletes can remind themselves of their innate resources to support them in overcoming their injury (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004). In addition, as mentioned in the preceding, positive psychology also focuses on gratitude (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004). Focusing on gratitude helps foster resilience to overcome obstacles and setbacks (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004). Positive psychology also offers assessments and questionnaires to help the athletes to become more aware of how different experiences and different aspects of their lives affect them, which allows them to gather more understanding to support them as they recover from their injury and prevent reinjury (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004).

After they have physically recovered from their injury, they can more easily overcome post-traumatic recovery by focusing on their strengths and resources to support them in performance (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004). When they focus on their strengths and resources to support them, they focus on what is “right” with them, as opposed to what is “wrong” with them, or what happened to them, they keep their mind focused more on constructive thought patterns and limit their capacity to think about their traumatic experience, which supports them in performance and minimizes their susceptibility to reinjury due to

distracted attention (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004; Weinberg & Gould, 2015). Positive psychology can play a role with an injured athlete during every step of injury including rehabilitation and post-traumatic recovery by helping them to focus on their strengths to support them and giving them the opportunity to recognize other opportunities in their life as they recover, which has the potential to enhance their rehabilitation (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004).

The preceding philosophies and applications of positive psychology could be used to support the future success of coaches and the individuals that they coach, by empowering them with the awareness of their strengths to achieve their greatest potential, enhancing their positivity and optimism to experience resilience to overcome obstacles to achieve their goals, providing them with the framework to achieve self-actualization, understanding the importance of knowing their values, being mindful of labels, and using assessments to get the most out of each individual to enhance their potential (Biswas-Diener, 2010). The coach and individuals will not only excel in their sport, but they will excel in their life (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Positive psychology has the potential to empower individuals with who they are, not just with what they do (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

## References

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