

Positive Affirmations and its Benefits on Psychological Well-Being

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Abstract

These days it can be seen that psychological health of the individual is very stressful. It's not only the adults who are under stress rather children, adolescents and people of all ages are facing stressful challenges which affect not only the physical health but also their mental health. But unlike the olden times when it was considered to be shameful or embarrassing to express the mental health issues now a day's people are more open about it. The fact is that besides physical health people have also started discussing openly about their mental health because they have now started hunting for mental peace. They have understood the fact that mental health is equally important and mental peace and strength can help the individual in solving and surpassing any crisis. Psychological well-being itself helps in maintaining good physical health also. This paper is an attempt to focus on various studies on the important variable of positive psychology i.e., positive affirmations which is considered to be very helpful and fruitful in maintaining psychological well-being.

Key words: Positive affirmations, psychological wellbeing, optimism, stressful, mental health

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Introduction:

Today's modern world life is fast paced and competitive. It's more mechanical and leads to lack of exercise which aggravates stress. The hectic lifestyle leads to imbalanced diets, wrong food habits and endless cups of caffeine or aerated drinks makes the individual more prone to stress. This in turn leads to ailments like high blood pressure, diabetes, heart problems etc. to lead a peaceful, happy, healthy and successful life it is very important to have good mental health.

Good mental health is similar to mental and psychological well-being and psychological well-being is quite similar to positive mental states.

Studies have found that people with higher psychological well-being are more likely to live healthier and longer lives. They are also more likely to enjoy a better quality of life (Kubzansky, Huffman, Boehm, Hernandez et al., 2018). Better psychological well-being is also associated with fewer social problems. For instance, research has found that people with high psychological well-being are less likely to engage in criminal activity or drugs abuse and alcohol.

Many studies support positive thinking or optimism as a source of psychological well-being.

Thinking positively improves the psychological well-being. In turn, as the psychological well-being improves, it becomes easier to think positively and feel good overall.

Optimism is strongly associated with greater well-being; it seems to play an important role in physical health (Avia & Vázquez, 1998). Maruta, Colligan, Malinchoc and Offord (2000, 2002) found a similar result in a sample with more than 700 general medicine patients who had been assessed on an optimism scale. Thirty years later it was shown that not only did the optimists live longer than the rest of the participants (50% risk of death reduction) but their survival rate was significantly better than the one expected on the basis of their social and demographic characteristics, namely age, sex and year of birth.

Generally, optimism is also related to a better state of the immune system. In a study of 62-87 year old healthy people a positive correlation was found between optimistic thinking style and better immune system responses (Kamen-Siegel, Rodin, Seligman and Dwyer, 1991). There are studies of women with breast cancer which shows that in addition to other

psychosocial variables such as the fact of having a steady relationship, initial optimism is a predictor of the quality of life several years later (Carver, Smith, Antoni, Petronis, Weiss et al., 2005).

Beyond the impact on the immune system, optimism seems to prevent diseases in the respiratory and the circulatory systems. In an eight-year prospective study, Kubzansky and her collaborators examined the consequences of optimism on lung performance in a group of 670 men between 45 and 89 years old. Those with a more optimistic attributional style had greater lung performance levels and a slower decline of this function, regardless of smoking. An additional study observed that after a ten-year follow-up period, the optimists had half the risk of suffering from coronary heart disease than those with high levels of pessimism (Kubzansky, Sparrow, Boconas, & Kawachi, 2001).

Secondly, an inclination towards optimism can affect health through the behaviour manifested in face of life problems generally and health problems specifically. This behaviour, if appropriate, can prevent chronic stress and the complication of physical and/or psychological problems. In this sense, optimism is very relevant, as it seems to encourage active strategies to cope with stress and health problems, which is related to problem solving behaviours, self-care and recovery plans (Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986). For example, in the study conducted by Scheier and his collaborators (1989) with a group of patients undergoing coronary bypass, the most optimistic ones, assessed before the surgical intervention, not only made more active rehabilitation plans, but showed better recovery and life quality six months later in relation to resuming work and free time, social and sexual activities.

But more generally, an adaptive, broad sense of self makes us more resilient to difficulties when they arise. Whether it's social pressures, health information that makes us feel uncomfortable, or feelings of exclusion, a broader self-concept can be an extremely helpful thing to have.

As inherently positive statements, affirmations are designed to encourage an optimistic mindset. And optimism in itself is a powerful thing. In terms of reducing negative

thoughts, affirmations have been shown to help with the tendency to linger on negative experiences (Wiesenfeld et al., 2001).

When we are able to deal with negative messages and replace them with positive statements, we can construct more adaptive, hopeful narratives about who we are and what we can accomplish.

Meaning of Positive Affirmations

Fortunately, positive affirmations are almost as easy to define as they're to practice. Put simply, negative thoughts can be challenged by the positive phrase or statements. Practicing positive affirmations is extremely simple, all one need to do is pick a phrase and repeat it to oneself.

Positive affirmations can be chosen to motivate self, encourage positive changes in one's life, or boosting self-esteem. If a person frequently finds himself getting caught up in negative self-talk, positive affirmations can be used to combat these often subconscious patterns and replace them with more adaptive narratives. In order to make lasting and long term changes positive affirmations require regular practice

Practice and popularity of positive affirmations is based on widely accepted and well-established psychological theory.

One of the important psychological theories behind positive affirmations is self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988). There are empirical studies based on the idea that we can maintain our sense of self-integrity by telling ourselves and affirming to what we believe in positive ways.

Very briefly, self-integrity relates to the global self-efficacy of the individual—his perceived ability to control moral outcomes and respond flexibly when his self-concept is threatened (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). So, human beings are motivated to protect themselves from these threats by maintaining their self-integrity.

In terms of positive affirmations, person doesn't say something like "I am a responsible godmother" because she wants to receive that praise. She says it because she wants to deserve that praise for acting in ways that are consistent with that particular personal value.

A large body of literature demonstrates that a class of interventions called self-affirmations have benefits across threatening situations; affirmations can decrease stress, increase well-being, improve academic performance and make people more open to behaviour change [for a review, see Cohen and Sherman (2014)]. Self-affirmations are statements that affirm one's self-worth, often by having individuals reflect on core values, which may give individuals a broader view of the self. This in turn can allow individuals to move beyond specific threats to self-integrity or self-competence (Steele, 1988; Cohen and Sherman, 2014).

The development of self-affirmation theory has led to neuroscientific research aimed at investigating whether any changes can be seen in the brain when people self-affirm in positive ways.

There is MRI evidence suggesting that when people practice self-affirmation tasks certain neural pathways are increased (Cascio et al., 2016). If you want to be super specific, the ventromedial prefrontal cortex—involved in positive valuation and self-related information processing—becomes more active when we consider our personal values (Falk et al., 2015; Cascio et al., 2016).

The results of a study conducted by Falk and colleagues suggest that when we choose to practice positive affirmations, we're better able to view "otherwise-threatening information as more self-relevant and valuable" (2015: 1979). As we'll see in a moment, this can have several benefits because it relates to how we process information about ourselves.

Benefits of Daily Affirmations

Now that we know more about the theories supporting positive affirmations, here are six examples of evidence from empirical studies that suggest that positive self-affirmation practices can be useful and constructive:

Self-affirmations have been shown to decrease health-deteriorating stress (Sherman et al., 2009; Critcher & Dunning, 2015);

Self-affirmations have been used effectively in interventions that led people to increase their physical behavior (Cooke et al., 2014);

Self-affirmations help in perceiving otherwise "threatening" messages with less resistance, including interventions (Logel & Cohen, 2012);

They can make us less likely to dismiss harmful health messages, responding instead with the intention to change for the better (Harris et al., 2007) and to eat more fruit and vegetables (Epton & Harris, 2008);

They have been linked positively to academic achievement by mitigating GPA decline in students who feel left out at college (Layous et al., 2017);

Self-affirmation has been demonstrated to lower stress and rumination (Koole et al., 1999; Weisenfeld et al., 2001).

Positive affirmations can help us to respond in a less defensive and resistant way when we're presented with threats. One study that was mentioned above showed that smokers reacted less dismissively to graphic cigarette packet warnings and reported intention to change their behavior (Harris et al., 2007).

In addition, self-affirmations may allow for more efficient use of psychological resources needed to deal with the incoming threat (Sherman, 2013).

At the behavioral level, self-affirmation improves problem-solving (Creswell DJ, 2013) and performance on tasks related to executive functioning (Harris PH, 2016). Various studies highlight that thinking about self-preferences activates neural reward pathways. A group of researchers hypothesized that self-affirmation would activate brain reward circuitry during functional MRI (fMRI) studies (Dutcher JM et al., 2016). The findings suggest "that self-affirmation may be rewarding and may provide a first step toward identifying a neural mechanism by which self-affirmation may produce beneficial effects."

Affirmations lead to positive outcomes. Some studies have provided initial evidence that spontaneous self-affirmation might promote physical and mental health. For instance, sports fans who spontaneously self-affirmed after their favoured team lost consumed fewer calories than those who did not (Cornil and Chandon, 2013), spontaneous self-affirmation buffered against anticipated negative affect in the context of

seeking threatening genomic information (Ferrer et al., 2014), and cancer survivors who wrote essays with more spontaneous self-affirmations reported fewer physical health symptoms 3-months later (Creswell et al., 2007).

Two studies have linked spontaneous self-affirmation to increased openness to a psychologically-threatening message (Townsend and Sood, 2012; Pietersma and Dijkstra, 2012). Using a nationally-representative data set (the Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS), the same one used for the current study), spontaneous self-affirmation was associated with better perceived communication with and quality of care from health care providers and greater health information seeking (Taber et al., 2015a), and with lower likelihood of cognitive impairment, greater happiness and hopefulness, greater self-efficacy for getting health information, and greater likelihood of seeking information about cancer among cancer survivors (Taber et al., 2015b). Together, these findings suggest that spontaneous self-affirmations are linked to health benefits (although measurement of spontaneous self-affirmation varies across these studies).

How self- affirmations are helpful

One account of why self-affirmations are successful is attributed to their ability to broaden a person's overall perspective and reduce the effect of negative emotions (Sherman, 2013; Cohen and Sherman, 2014). For instance, researchers have suggested that self-affirmations remind individuals of psychosocial resources that extend beyond a specific threat, which allows them to focus on sources of positive self-worth that transcends the threat. This in turn is thought to reduce reactivity to the threat and protect overall psychological well-being (Koole et al., 1999; Cohen et al., 2009; Cook et al., 2012; Sherman et al., 2013).

Such effects might arise through several different pathways. Affirmations may increase focus on sources of positive value to individuals. Self-affirmation interventions often depend on having participants reflect on personal core values and rewarding experiences. This pathway would engage neural mechanisms associated with reward and positive valuation. Systems associated with positive valuation play an important role in

successful affirmation and are consistent with the broadened value account of why self-affirmation interventions succeed (Koole et al., 1999; Cohen et al., 2009; Cook et al., 2012; Sherman et al., 2013). A recent meta-analysis demonstrates that brain regions most prominently involved in reward and positive valuation includes the ventral striatum (VS) and ventral medial prefrontal cortex (VMPFC; Bartra et al., 2013). The VS and VMPFC are brain regions that are most ordinarily related to the expectation and receipt of positively valued or rewarding outcomes (Bartra et al., 2013). Importantly, this technique encodes not only primary rewards (such as food) but also more abstract rewards (Bartra et al., 2013), of the sort that are called to mind by personally meaningful values in self-affirmation.

Increased activity within the VMPFC is related to imagining positive instead of negative future events (D'Argembeau et al., 2008) and increases when anticipating future rewards (Benoit et al., 2011, 2014).

It has been found that imagining future personally relevant, emotionally positive and rewarding events is associated with changes in VMPFC, striatum, MPFC and PCC (D'Argembeau et al., 2008, 2010; Benoit et al., 2011, 2014). Increased activity in the MPFC has also been shown to positively correlate with imagining positive or negative future episodes (D'Argembeau et al., 2008) and such activation is further associated with projected reward value of the imagined future (Benoit et al., 2011, 2014). In addition, mental simulations focusing on future events have been shown to benefit goal planning and one's psychological wellbeing (for a review, see Schacter, 2012).

Meta-analyses across a variety of tasks find that self-related processing is most often associated with increased activity in the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC) and posterior cingulate cortex (PCC; Northoff et al., 2006; Denny et al., 2012). Thus, if self-affirmations succeed due to a boost in self-related processing before threat exposure, activity within the MPFC and PCC should increase during affirmation.

In summary, it has been suggested by the scientist and behavioral care providers that self-affirmation reminds people of important aspects

of the self, enabling them to look at events from a reasonable, considered, and rational viewpoint (Sherman DK et al, 2011). By enhancing the psychological resources of self-integrity, self-affirmation reduces defensive responses to threatening information and events, resulting in positive outcomes in various areas like psychological and physical health, education, prejudice, discrimination, and social conflicts (Sherman DK et al, 2006). Thus, after being studied extensively by social psychologists, self-affirmation has now just begun to receive attention. Repeated use of affirmations during a meditative state can help to rewrite messages—but as long as the individual is ready and willing to manifest positive change.

Therefore, all of the above studies suggest that one should practice positive affirmations on daily basis as these are associated with psychological wellbeing.

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