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Gratitude Intervention: A case Study

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Introduction

The science and art of applying a Positive Psychology intervention consists of harnessing the findings of the evidence base while making decisions regarding their appropriateness for an individual. During her pre-interview J spoke about her experience of unstable emotions which had been persistent for a while and how she finds it difficult to relax and enjoy life. This case study explores this process through the use of a gratitude intervention with a female undergraduate in her early twenties who wished to increase her level happiness and of wellness in a balanced way. Gratitude occurs after people receive something that they perceive of having value (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). It is assumed to counteract the hedonic adaption to positive events, and hence prolong the positive feelings associated with them (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Gratitude interventions have been found to improve well-being and increase feelings of happiness (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). The challenge of applying the evidence base with individuals is how to effectively select from those proven exercises such that they work together to help an individual to achieve their well-being and happiness goals.

- Would the participant have higher gratitude scores post intervention?
- Would the participant have higher happiness scores post intervention?
- Would the Wheel of Life scores be higher and more balanced post intervention?

Method

Participant

J was a 22 year old 3rd year undergraduate law student who wanted to improve her happiness and well-being in a balanced way.

Measures

Subjective Happiness Scale ((Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) Gratitude Questionnaire[GQ-6]((McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002)

Intervention

The intervention consisted of four weekly coaching session. Each one took a particular focus on gratitude.

- **Week 1: Three Good Things Exercise** Listing three things for which one is gratitude for each night for a week is said to boost positive feelings and enhance well-being (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Is a good initial choice as it increases energy at the beginning of an intervention.
- **Week 2: Gratitude Contemplation** Gratitude contemplation involves thinking globally and writing about positive experiences, such as an pleasurable summer holiday etc once a day for a week. Focusing on experiences for which we are grateful helps activate and elevate immediate positive mood (Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003)

- **Week 3: Write and Deliver Gratitude Letter** This week J wrote a gratitude letter which she delivered to the person. The purpose was to increase social bonds. It can increase happiness and stimulate positive behaviour change (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009)

- **Week 4: Three Good Things Exercise** J was asked which of the exercises she would like to repeat, she choose Three Good Things

Results

Gratitude Scores

The four week gratitude based intervention was effective in that J. increased her level of gratitude (see figure 1). With a pre-score of 27, J was scoring below the average (M=35.52, SD= 5.28) for US students ((McCullough et al., 2002). However, her post score of 36 brings her up to the average. In line with this increase we would also expect to see higher levels of happiness.

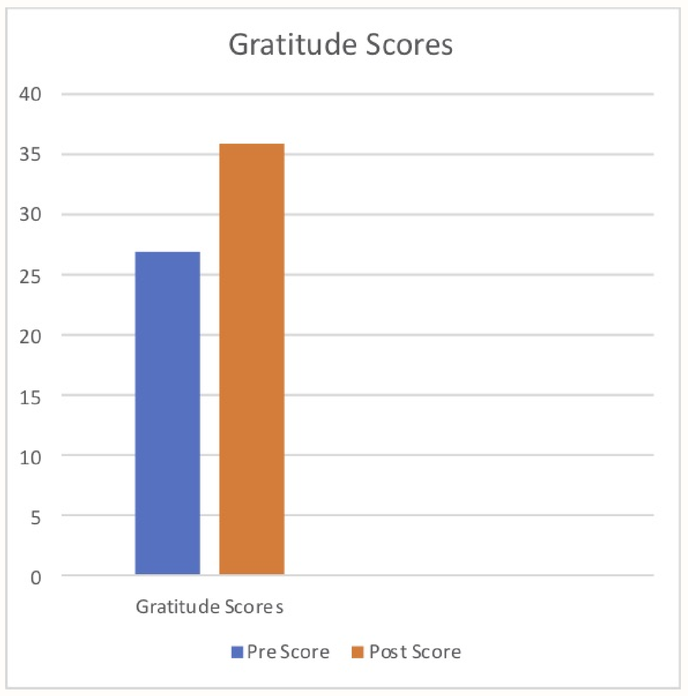

Figure 1: Pre and Post Gratitude Scores

Happiness Scores

As predicted J.s level of happiness improved. Her happiness score increased from 4 to 6 as a result of the intervention. In the original work the sample means of US college students ranged from 4.63 to 5.07 (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). J's scores are within the standard deviations of these means, however she did move from the lower range to the upper range, and close to the ceiling score (7). This change is in line with J's goal of feeling happier with herself.

Figure 2: Pre and Post Happiness Scores

Wheel of Life

Noticeable difference in J's Wheel of Life is a more expansive shape, particularly in Family and Friends, and Personal Growth zones. She reported making more contact with her family. Her post self-report is consistent with more satisfaction with relationships.

"I seem to respond more to social gatherings lately than before and I have made some new friends, one of them has invited me to a birthday party in April and I am looking forward to it."

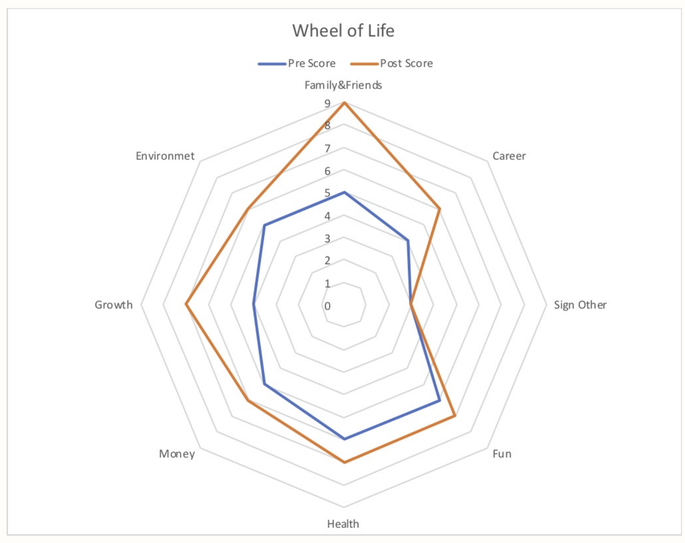

Figure 3: Pre and Post Wheel of Life:Pre:blue, Post: orange

J's perspective

J reported that the experience provided her with a new perspective,"I find the whole experience fascinating, though a bit different and perhaps difficult to see good in almost everything or to be grateful when things are tough, but it feels good now when I look back at the times I was expressing this gratitude, very practical and enjoyable. I think it is definitely something I would like to keep doing. I'd love to know more about this positive psychology thing in the future."

Summary and conclusions

This intervention increased J's gratitude scores as well as her happiness scores. Further she reported increased satisfaction with her relationships with her family and friends. As well as improving well-being gratitude interventions can strengthen social bonds. And although this is a case study, and therefore does not provide a firm basis for generalisation, it does point to one practical way in which evidence based approaches can be harnessed to construct a suite of exercises to help an individual to achieve her particular goals in the area of happiness and well-being.

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