#387: Team positive: Taking the science of wellbeing to a systems level

VOICEOVER

This is Up Close, the research talk show from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

ANDI HORVATH

Hi, I?m Dr Andi Horvath, thanks for joining us. Today we get Up Close to our wellbeing and mental health, and the language we use to describe it. The field of positive psychology seeks to bolster our mental health literacy as key to our collective wellbeing, our happiness, our ability to thrive and to cope with difficult times. While some argue that positive psychology offers useful evidence-based lessons to achieve these goals, others are sceptical, calling it merely a focus on happiology, that its benefits are overstated.

Our guest today shifts the focus of this so called science of wellbeing, from the individual to the level of systems like workplaces, schools and health systems. That is, organisations and networks of people that make up our societies. By taking on board things like our negativity bias, our motivations to approach or avoid, and other behaviours, we may be able to start to tackle what doesn?t work in our social systems, and by doing so introduce a workable wellbeing literacy to create conditions that allow individuals and groups attached to those systems to thrive.

Joining us is Associate Professor Lindsay Oades who is Director of the Centre for Positive Psychology at the University of Melbourne. Lindsay is a research psychologist who?s authored numerous books including The Psychology of Positivity and Strength-based Approaches at Work and Wellness, Recovery and Mental Health. Dr Oades is also Non-Executive Director of Action for Happiness Australia and the Reach Foundation. Lindsay, welcome.

LINDSAY OADES

Thank you, great to be here.

ANDI HORVATH

Let?s start with the notion of thriving. You often ask people in the audience when you?re speaking to define the parameters or rather root metaphors, as you call them, that surround the notion of thriving. So, we?re putting you on the spot now, explain thriving to us.

LINDSAY OADES

Sure; you?ll hear many terms, thriving, flourishing, wellbeing. Thriving is one that we?ve been using lately because it tends to capture people?s imagination around growth and hardiness. That not everything is great, not everything is wonderful, but thriving is a sort of a strength component to it as well. We often ask people to define wellbeing as well because many people have different views of what these terms actually mean. it?s quite important to unpack that, and that?s where I start rather than telling people what it is.

ANDI HORVATH

Well let?s drill down. Is wellbeing and thriving, say, the presence of something positive, in the of negatives? What other multiple parts of thriving and wellbeing have come up as a pattern from your audiences?

LINDSAY OADES

Sure; to start with a historical term like welfare, people think of welfare as helping someone who has a difficulty, that sort of idea. The more contemporary, more recent versions of wellbeing do emphasise the presence of a positive attribute. It?s going beyond illness or beyond a problem to having either happiness, meaning in life, purpose, those sorts of things, in addition to the absence of the negative. A lot of our traditions have really been focused on the absence of the negative such as a lot of the history of the medical profession. It?s about treating a problem or dealing with a problem. Wellbeing is about dealing with a problem but also going beyond and having the presence of positive things, or at least the contemporary view is. Thriving and wellbeing are similar, they?re not hugely different. Some people prefer terms than others, but in the literature we?re really talking about wellbeing.

ANDI HORVATH

Define wellbeing for us in the terms of hedonic or eudaimonic.

LINDSAY OADES

The philosophers gave us the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic from some of the work of Jeremy Bentham. Hedonic wellbeing is essentially pleasure, or satisfying your needs and having pleasure. Drinking red wine, having sex, whatever, things that bring you pleasure, eating a nice meal, that?s hedonic wellbeing. It?s basically getting your needs met and seeking pleasure, or having more pleasure than pain, that?s the essential idea and that?s really pervasive, it?s all over the place. Eudaimonic wellbeing, coming from Aristotle?s philosophy, which is really the idea of true self, living a virtuous life, living a good life, reaching your full potential, that?s a more complex and more ethically based view of wellbeing.

That distinction is very important, because depending on which one you?re using you can answer questions very differently. One example I like to give is, does having children make you happy? The evidence is that hedonically for a period of time, no they don?t make you happy, they?re hard work, but eudaimonically, yes, they help you reach your true self, your meaning, your purpose, those sorts of ideas.

Some people say they?re silly definitions, but they?re actually really important if we want to get more fine grained about our understanding of wellbeing. Some people say the word happiness. To a wellbeing scientist, saying happy is a bit like saying germ to a microbiologist. We like to get a bit more fine grained about what we?re talking about so we can get a bit more specific.

ANDI HORVATH

Wellbeing is a temporary state, just like it?s impossible to be positive all the time. When you?re negative though, is that sometimes not really being negative, it?s actually a reality check?

LINDSAY OADES

Sure, this is one of the common critiques of positive psychology, happiness, happiology, these sorts of ideas that there?s this claim that we should be happy all the time. Firstly, how we define happiness again is really important. If it?s an emotion, a positive emotion, by definition an emotion is fleeting and comes and goes, so it?s perishable, it ends. The wellbeing scientists don?t claim you should be happy all the time, in fact there?s a lot of recognition of the importance of negative emotions, how they lead us to support us in survival ways. We need to have fear or anxiety or pain to function in an evolutionary sense.

ANDI HORVATH

Let?s explore that further, tell us about negativity bias, what is it and what utility has it had for humans in the past?

LINDSAY OADES

It?s really this idea that we pay attention to negative things, or we pay attention to things that can be sometimes life threatening, and some researchers argue that that has a basis in evolution and that helps us survive. If you think about your own emotions and you think about fear, they have quite strong emotions, whereas contentment or joy are often lighter, they?re not as intense but they?re often more frequent. One way of thinking about it is the positive emotions can be experienced more frequently, the negative emotions less frequently but more intense, they?re a call to action. That is, something is happening, we need to pay attention to a negative event, it may be life threatening.

Many people in the positive psychology camp would argue that that can be limiting if we get stuck there. That is part of the equation but I would say it?s incomplete and we need to also be able to pay attention to and leverage the positive aspects of our experience and the environment.

ANDI HORVATH

Tell us about the approach and avoidance motivations and maybe give us some examples.

LINDSAY OADES

Approach and avoidance motivations is something that?s been around quite a long time in the motivation research. Some people have heard of approach and avoidance conflict, it?s should I go there, should I come back, and we kind of get stuck, but essentially an approach motivation is where you?re moving towards something positive. You?re drawn to it. You may be saving for a holiday, that?s a good thing and you?re moving towards it. Avoidance motivation is you?re moving away from something negative. You may be literally running from a lion, that?s avoidance or escape motivation as it?s sometimes called, or it may not be so life threatening. It could be that you?re motivated to reduce your anxiety, or you?re motivated to get rid of something in your life you don?t want, like overeating or something like that.

Again, one of the ideas is the avoidance motivation is very intense, it?s very rapid. You?re not generally interested in the process of it, you just want to eliminate the negative, eliminate the pain, get rid of it, get away from it.

Jonathan Haidt, an author in positive psychology, the author of the Happiness Hypothesis, he gives the example of drowning versus making love. It?s a very memorable example. When we?re drowning, that?s avoidance motivation, we want to get to the top, we want to get air, we?re not swimming around enjoying the journey looking at the fish, we are motivated for it to end. We want the potential death experience to end. Versus making love, it?s more of a process to be enjoyed over time. Those types of examples can be useful. Thinking about the motivation underpinning them is what we?re talking about.

ANDI HORVATH

Now, we understand negativity bias at the individual level but you and your colleagues have suggested that negativity bias exists at a systems level, explain that to us.

LINDSAY OADES

Negativity bias in general can be helpful. It helps us pay attention to things that are life threatening. If you take a group of individuals who design and run systems, be it an education system, be it a finance system, be it a health system, what I call negativity bias to systems. The medical system is a very good example, it essentially is designed to diagnose and treat negative states, that is diseases or dysfunction. There?s nothing wrong with that but that is one way of designing a system. The same way you can look at financial systems, where we often have a huge emphasis on cost and the justification is, we can control cost but we can?t control revenue. Often what it leads to is systems that reward and structure a focus on cost reduction, or reduction of what is seen as a negative thing.

That is okay in and of itself, but I would argue it?s incomplete. The argument here is not to just swap everything over to be approach motivation and positive, so to speak, it?s about what I would call a dual process. Part of the time we do need to be avoidance focused dealing with the negative, part of the time we need to be approached focused and moving towards the presence of positive things. Be they health and wellbeing, be they profit and revenue, etcetera. People know this intuitively, what I?m saying to many people wouldn?t be that contentious. When you actually look at the systems and how they behave, and people in the systems, they very much get caught in the negativity bias and brought back to the focus on removal of negative.

ANDI HORVATH

I?m Andi Horvath and our guest today on Up Close is Psychology Researcher Associate Professor Lindsay Oades. We?re talking about taking positive psychology and mental health literacy to a systems level, where he and his colleagues claim it

could make a difference to our wellbeing and ability to thrive.

Lindsay, there are a lot of models and descriptions of what makes people happy. Is there a common thread amongst these?

LINDSAY OADES

There are common threads and there are different attempts at what predicts wellbeing and what predicts wellbeing at the level of the individual versus group based. Certainly the philosophers brought us, as I was talking about before, the hedonistic view, more pleasure than pain, which led to meeting needs and being satisfied. Economists used to use consumption as an index to wellbeing, because if we consume something it brings us pleasure. If we have more money we can consume more, we?ll get more pleasure. That was a very simple observable way of tracking wellbeing. Then the psychologists came to it more recently and are looking at more psychological views of wellbeing.

Do we have a sense of choice or autonomy, do we feel competent at what we do, do we have a sense of mastery over our environment, do we have a sense of purpose or meaning in our life. These are different things that the researchers will try to use to predict wellbeing. But one of the ones which I think is the big one and the common one which is very pervasive is our sense of relationships, belonging, connectedness. Different ways of defining it, but that cluster of the idea that other people matter, that we are social beings. That is a really common factor across the literatures. Sometimes it gets missed and then people correct it but it is hard to deny that we need each other and that we are satisfied if we have others around us.

I?m currently working on some work saying, rather than that being a predictor of wellbeing that actually is wellbeing. That is, the experiences we have with others, is wellbeing. If you ask some people to define it or give examples, many people will say family, friends, being with others, those sorts of experiences. It?s not the only thing they?ll say, but it?s very common and pervasive.

ANDI HORVATH

Lindsay, clearly we exist not just because, I am, but because, we are. We?re in it together, so to speak, and therefore language is critical to our framing and communication of the world to each other such as the iconic glass half full or glass half empty framings. Tell us about how language matters.

LINDSAY OADES

Language matters in so many ways. Some people would argue language actually shapes our thoughts. The strong view of language is it isn?t just a communication

mechanism but it actually shapes the way we think and the way we experience the world. One of the things I?ve noticed, following on from what I was talking about in terms of negativity bias, positive psychology, wellbeing. If you go into, say, a health system for example, there is a group of people that are highly trained in identifying illness, treating illness and they do a very good job. If you look at their vocabulary, they will interpret the experiences of what is in front of them through a negative lens. The words they?re using are primarily negative in nature. For example, they?re disease based. In a mental health context it will be depression, anxiety, substance abuse, etcetera. So, you have people who are extremely articulate in those words to make sense of experiences and therefore that starts to frame the way they will see those experiences and experience things in general.

One of the challenges, if we are going to have what I would call a population based approach to wellbeing, and not just mental wellbeing but wellbeing in general, is people actually need some linguistic apparatus, if you like. Some language and tools at the positive end of the spectrum in addition to, not in replace of, but in addition to dealing with the negative states, the negative end of the spectrum.

Part of our agenda is to develop this idea of wellbeing literacy which is really about the vocabulary, knowledge and skills that we use to intentionally improve our own wellbeing or the wellbeing of others. People would have heard of terms like mental health literacy, health literacy, financial literacy, we?re hearing about digital literacy. We know more and more about what predicts people?s wellbeing, what leads to it, how community structures and systems improve wellbeing. It?s not necessarily in our vocabulary and in our knowledge set yet at a population level.

ANDI HORVATH

Tell us about some case studies where wellbeing literacy has been used. I believe it?s being used for schizophrenia as well.

LINDSAY OADES

I?ll start with examples from schizophrenia. It?s only fairly recently that I?ve explicitly started calling it wellbeing literacy, but if you track through some of the case studies that?s kind of what we were doing. Schizophrenia is a good example to follow on from what we were talking about with systems that focus on the negative. You have a lot of hard working good mental health staff working across the world to help people who have experienced schizophrenia, for example. It?s seen as one of the most disabling, disenfranchising conditions. This workforce is a workforce of people who essentially are trained in what I was saying. They are trained to focus on the negative experiences, diagnosing, voices, delusions, etcetera. Very elaborate highly trained people, some of them, with elaborate vocabularies around deficit, disease, diagnosis.

In the past 30 years you?ve had this idea of a recovery movement, mental health recovery movement, which is really a grassroots movement from people who have lived with the experience of schizophrenia, for example, and they are arguing that rather than the mental health profession or doctors or psychiatrists defining what is a positive outcome for me, or what is recovery, I will do it myself. From the work we?ve done over several years looking at the narratives of people who have lived with schizophrenia, the way they construe and word their own and rate their own stories, themes or motives such as hope, meaning, sense of identity or agency and purpose, these ideas really run through the narratives.

If you unpack them and look at them and explore them they?re really about the person having their own control over their own experience and they?re really about moving towards positive states. By and large the narratives don?t emphasise symptoms or symptom reductions. Occasionally they emphasise symptom control but only inasmuch as it allows them to move towards the positive attributes that they?re looking for.

What we?re seeing there in terms of wellbeing literacy is many of the people who are having these experiences didn?t necessarily have the language or concepts around what the positive end looked like. They had the avoidance motivation of reducing symptoms but they weren?t in the context of people who had this positive end of the spectrum language. It wasn?t only just that they had the symptoms, there wasn?t a future to go to that was positive because they weren?t able to linguistically build it. It?s not that language creates everything but it certainly helps because it helps people make sense of and communicate and share experiences.

Part of the work with the mental health recovery and some of the stuff we?ve done, particularly in an Australian context, the idea of the collaborative recovery model which is a service delivery model. Used in many Australian states, is really about helping people develop a hopeful idea for the future. Using ideas that come from the wellbeing literature, the personal development literature in addition to, not in replacing of, the medical approach, which is symptom based.

ANDI HORVATH

I?m Andi Horvath and on this episode of Up Close we?re talking about positive psychology and creating conditions to potentially boost wellbeing with academic and author Lindsay Oades.

Now Lindsay, let?s look at taking this to a systems level. In human networks and organisations, for example, in schools, how does this work?

LINDSAY OADES

The schools are a great place to start. Start with students who are, say, between 12

years old and 17 years old, for example. Let?s focus in on that age group for the moment. In terms of what I would call a generational approach or a population based approach to mental health and wellbeing this is an incredible leverage point. It?s certainly going upstream rather than waiting for people to arrive at a health system when they?re already starting to manifest problems. It?s not going fully upstream, we can go prenatal if you like, but let?s stay with this group. In that regard, the school sector is incredibly important. We?re seeing a rise of this idea of positive education which is an evolution of positive psychology and the science of wellbeing applied in the education sector.

In essence, teaching young people how to improve their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around them, or at least teaching them in a way which increases their wellbeing. One of the things I say is, wellbeing literacy is needed. It?s okay to go into a school and then measure have we improve the student?s wellbeing, but it?s like that idea of give a person a fish and they?ll eat, but teach them how to fish and they?ll keep eating. In this case, if we teach people the skills and knowledge and language around wellbeing, they will be able to use it in an ongoing way for their own wellbeing but very importantly for the wellbeing of others. So we?re not talking about a totally please the self, be happy in only the self. We?re talking about a functional social-based approach where we can help ourselves and help each other in a whole generation of people who have this new skillset.

At a wellbeing literacy level, not only is it going into schools and running programs but actually thinking in the same way we do international rankings of literacy and numeracy which is seen as the pervasive underlying skills of everything. I argue we also need to look at wellbeing literacy. What language do we need and what language do we expect a 12-year-old, 13-year-old, 14-year-old, to have, and what knowledge do we expect that they will have around wellbeing for things that they can intentionally change. What can we intentionally change? We know we can manage our diet, we know we can manage our sleep, we know we can manage our exercise, but we also know that people who have more purpose in their life tend to function better over time.

We know the importance of relationships. We know quite a bit from wellbeing science, particularly in the last 30 years than we ever did. We can now bring this to the curriculum and the extracurricular activities more systematically. There are many people, and probably some people will listen and say, well, I already do that, and that?s a good thing. People are already doing this, but not in the same systematic way that we?re teaching numeracy and literacy.

ANDI HORVATH

You?re talking about teaching knowledge, vocabulary and skills. What should be taught and why, are you talking about teaching things like gratitude, resilience and these sorts of things?

LINDSAY OADES

Take gratitude which I call the poster child of positive psychology lately, everyone will talk about gratitude, gratitude exercises, gratitude diaries. Underpinning that, if a literacy is firstly having the word, the vocabulary part of it, the knowledge is, what do we know about gratitude. We know quite a bit, I call it the quick antidote at feeling crap or feeling negative, that?s a very Australian way of putting it. If you want to feel better quickly, be thankful to someone, and it?s fairly hard to be negative when you?re doing those exercises; so actually having the knowledge of that and the skills on how to do it. The higher level skill is monitoring self knowing that I?m not feeling very good so therefore I should. I don?t expect that we?re going to get that out of the 12-year olds immediately. You won?t get it out of many adults, that high level skill.

Gratitude is an example of what I would call the content as an activity we can do and some very good example, but working backwards, what is the vocabulary around it, what do we want students to know about gratitude and then what is the skill. We do that with other parts of curriculum. So rather than relying on individual schools and good teachers we can do that at a broader population level. We do things like mental health first aid where we teach people the knowledge and signs of identifying and then referring on for people in distress. We have the same skillsets for important positive attributes, but because of the negativity bias we tend to focus on and we think we?re done when we?ve dealt with the negative, whereas the positive end of the spectrum can also be done well, because it?s important in its own right and then because it also has a secondary buffering effect against the negative end of the spectrum.

ANDI HORVATH

We?ve got the kids learning mental health literacy, but let?s move to another common system level which is the workplace, the adults. How does one implement wellbeing literacy there?

LINDSAY OADES

We?ve obviously spent a huge amount of time in the workplace. We?ve just got a new book about to come out on strengths and positivity at work which is experts from around the world talking about different positive psychological issues such as gratitude, compassion, or some people call soft skills in the workplace. Again, we know increasingly what is creating happiness and wellbeing for people. Often it?s the quality of relationships, trust and feeling validated. A lot of interpersonal issues in the workplace are having a huge impact on the wellbeing job satisfaction etcetera of employees. One of the questions is, in the same way in the school sector we might ask what is the wellbeing literacy of the parent, the teacher and the student.

What?s the wellbeing literacy of the boss or the manager and the mid-level manager

and then the employees. What is the vocabulary, knowledge and skills related to wellbeing broadly in the workplace? What language do they use with each other at work around wellbeing? We?re seeing a lot of workplace wellbeing programs. Often they?re top down, often they?re biased towards the physical. Often there?s a negativity bias because they?re about a cost reduction for the employer. Wellbeing literacy approach in the workplace is really going in and looking at the language and interactions of the people around wellbeing and what they?re using to make sense of wellbeing themselves.

It?s more, I wouldn?t say bottom up, but it?s a more a naturalistic, it?s not a programmatic approach. It?s actually looking at what they are doing and how their language and interaction changes over time around wellbeing. Again, it?s more the substrate in the workplace about how they language issues around this. There are naturalistic ways of measuring things like these two, Twitter, Facebook, a lot of the social media. They?re essentially language repositories where we?re seeing people?s natural language. Within that natural language are there assumptions around wellbeing, what creates it, what stops it and how they?re using it to make sense of their experiences in this area.

We talk a lot about workplace culture, culture goes with language and again we can pick up on things like that. Simple examples are those such as what we call conditional happiness. I?ll be happy when. I?ll be happy when the year is over because I will finish work and have holidays. They are problematic statements because you?re always making feeling good or feeling well conditional on something. That?s a phrase but there are things like that which is quite micro which can be quite pervasive and shape the way we approach things.

ANDI HORVATH

Lindsay, I?m going to put you on the spot. Some people are critical about the positive psychology movement saying it?s fluffy, too Pollyanna, even delusional. Do any of these naysayers have a point and how do you push back?

LINDSAY OADES

The one about fluffy is interesting because if you mean fluffy by intangible, I think that critique is well founded and is a real challenge. It?s a real challenge for wellbeing because we talk about the absence of negative states, avoidance, motivation, moving away from the negative. We can often point to the negative, we can point to the lion, we can point to the thing causing pain or we can point to a physical disease and it?s quite tangible. The presence of a positive state, if it?s a psychological state it?s not as tangible. I think intangibility is the enemy of wellbeing and so what we need to do is to map it onto things which make sense to people, then it won?t seem fluffy.

You will see people saying better wellbeing predicts better academic outcomes, you?ll see that in the education system. Better wellbeing predicts better productivity in the workplace. In a health context, better wellbeing prevents illness. You will see it used to achieve other things. That personally annoys me at one level but at another level I realise it?s necessary. People need to hang it off something for it to have value. The other critique you will hear which is a much more sophisticated critique, and that is, it?s a neo-liberal focus on the individual, it?s just about pleasuring the individual. If that?s all it was I think that?s a really well-founded criticism. Some of the work we?re doing and colleagues is what we call positive system science, which is really trying to marry the positive and strengths approach, motivation focus of positive psychology to system science, so thinking more broadly about systems and their properties and bringing those two together to develop.

The critique that it may be too individualistic I think is at times a very fair critique. The critique that it?s only about pleasure of individuals, I think that?s a bit stretched. As I?ve already said, I think the best most robust predictor of wellbeing is relationships. For it to be individually focused is flawed because we are social beings so it?s fundamentally problematic. So, yes, we need to be more systems approached in the way we think about wellbeing. One of the reasons I like wellbeing literacy so much is language by its nature is a between, it?s communication between people, so it?s inherently systems or network based.

ANDI HORVATH

Lindsay, thanks for being our guest on Up Close.

LINDSAY OADES

Lovely to be here, thank you very much.

ANDI HORVATH

We?ve been speaking with Associate Professor Lindsay Oades, Director of The Centre for Positive Psychology at the University of Melbourne about taking a systems level approach to cultivating wellbeing. You?ll find the details of Lindsay?s publications on the Up Close website, together with a full transcript of this and all our other programs.

Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne, Australia. This episode was recorded on 20 December 2016. Producer was Eric van Bemmel, Audio Engineering by Gavin Nebauer. I?m Andi Horvath. Cheers.