



POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY PROGRAMS FOR FAMILIES



A summary of Using Positive Psychology Interventions to Strengthen Family Happiness: A Family Systems Approach (Waters, 2020).

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This is a brief related to the series, Emotional Well-Being: The Science and Practice of Feeling Well. This brief summarizes an article by Waters on positive psychology interventions for families.

Introduction

Positive psychology interventions for families are programs that help build positive emotions in families. A family is a relational system.¹ Relational systems are a connected set of parts that are organized around a shared purpose. In the case of a family, the parts include the people, traditions, and resources such as strategies to create positive emotions. The shared purpose is family functioning^{2,3}. Within the family system, there are two sub-systems that contribute to family functioning: the emotion and meaning sub-systems⁴.

The **emotion sub-system** manages the emotional climate of a family, which can be affected by communication and interaction patterns. It includes supportive and encouraging interactions between family members that create happiness.

The **meaning sub-system** manages a family's identity, resilience, and understanding of how one's family fits in relation to other families around them. Family identity is key and usually influenced by earlier generations.

In the past, many positive psychology interventions have targeted problems in the family. However, programs should be focused on family strengths^{5,6,7}. Waters examines the effectiveness of two brief positive psychology interventions for families.

Defining Positive Psychology Interventions for Families

Many of the existing family interventions focus on areas where a family is struggling⁸. Problem-focused interventions may be helpful when a family is in a crisis, but do not help families build long-term skills for positive family functioning^{8,9}. In this paper, the author presents three key elements that differentiate a problem-focused family intervention from a positive psychology intervention for families¹.

“Family happiness is defined as the shared experience of joy, contentment, and well-being spread across a family, combined with a sense that family life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile.

- Lea Waters^{10,11}

Element	Example	Non-Example
1. Skills taught in the interventions are positive.	Focus on effective communication and empathy.	Focus on conflict resolution and anger management.
2. The goal is to increase positive outcomes.	Increase happiness or life satisfaction.	Reduce mental health symptoms.
3. The types of families targeted are mainstream families.	Mentally-healthy family members, typically developing children	Family members with mental health disorders, children with disabilities or developmental delays.

The Current Research

Many current programs for families are labeled as positive but only include one of the elements above. Therefore, they are still problem focused. Waters examined the effectiveness of two brief positive psychology interventions for families that contain all three elements of a positive psychology intervention. The author hypothesized that families in the interventions would show an increase in family happiness after the intervention.

In total, 300 families from Canada, United States, Hong Kong, Norway, Australia, and New Zealand participated in the study. Just over half (52%) of the families were nuclear (a family with two parents and children), 30% were blended (a family with two parents and children from current and previous relationships), and 18% were single parent families. Each family had 2-6 members. Each family member completed an online survey on subjective happiness¹² and scores were calculated to find the average group happiness score for each family.

Families were randomly placed into three treatment groups with 100 families in each group. The first group, the Control Group, received no intervention. The second group received the Strengths and Family Contract intervention (designed around the emotion sub-system). The third group received the Strong Ancestry-Strong Family Intervention (designed around the meaning sub-system). Each intervention lasted two weeks. Four weeks after the interventions ended, all families re-took the survey on subjective happiness and average family scores were calculated.

Program 1: Strengths Family Contract

- Designed around emotion sub-system – creating family conversations about emotions – “what makes us happy?”
- Positive goals (example: increase cooperation) instead of negative goals (example: decrease conflict)
- Five sequential steps:
 1. Discussion about what makes their family happy.
 2. Set two goals for how they can be a happier family.
 3. Discussion of how each family member can use their individual strengths to support family goals.
 4. Family members spot strengths in one another over the course of the week.
 5. Weekly conversation to reflect on the progress made towards the goal and the strengths used by each family member towards the goal.

Program 2: Strong Ancestry-Strong Family

- Designed around the meaning sub-system – create conversations around family appreciation – “who are we as a family?”
- Four sequential steps:
 1. Share stories of the strengths and resilience of their ancestors and relatives.
 2. Work together to map the family stories onto the strengths family tree handout.
 3. Family members spot strengths in other over the course of two weeks.
 4. Discuss the identity of their own (i.e., immediate) family based upon the strengths tree map of their ancestors.

Findings & Conclusions

Families that participated in an intervention reported significantly higher levels of happiness than families who did not complete an intervention. The program the families completed did not impact their sense of happiness.

Families are systems built on the idea that the whole is greater than its parts^{2,3}. As a system, when one part of the system changes, there are impacts on other parts of that system¹³. There are two ways positive emotions can impact family system cycles. First, positive emotions can have “in the moment” effects. Positive emotions that occur in the moment impact the way someone thinks and interacts with others at that point in time. Second, positive emotions can have effects over time. Here, the momentary changes build over time to create skills and resources that will help create positive emotions within the family. The author found that brief positive psychology interventions focused on either the emotion or meaning sub-system increased happiness across family members over time.



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¹⁰ Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). *The how of happiness: A scientific approach to getting the life you want*. Penguin Press.

¹¹ Barsade, S. G., & Knight, A. P. (2015). Group affect. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 2(1), 21-46. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032414-111316>.

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¹³ von Bertalanffy, L. (1968). *General system theory: Foundations, development, applications*. George Braziller.

