

## Commentary

# Positive Psychiatry: Reframing Mental Health Care Among Elderly

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In 2020, 55.8 million Americans were 65 and over, representing 16.8% of the total population. Chronic conditions such as cancer, cardiovascular and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, musculoskeletal disease, and metabolic disorder are prominent among the aging. Multiple factors such as declines in mobility, frailty, pain, and disability, together with a loss of independence, can indirectly contribute to changes in mood, increasing psychological distress, anxiety, and depression. Geropsychiatric clinicians should consider their approach to mental health care, taking into consideration life events, including loneliness, social isolation, and the loss of a significant other. Traditional psychiatry tends to focus on determining causative factors that contribute to mental illness while developing treatments that manage the problem. While effective, this approach often overlooks inherent traits that can bolster an individual's resilience and stymie recovery.

Positive psychiatry emphasizes an individual's strengths, well-being, and optimal functioning rather than focusing solely on deficits like damaged habits, unconscious drives, or childhood traumas as causes of distress and neurocognitive dysfunction. This approach prioritizes recognizing and utilizing existing capacities to foster mental wellness. Mental health is viewed as a dynamic continuum, fluctuating between optimal well-being and significant distress based on life circumstances, personal experiences, and intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Positive psychiatry acknowledges this variability and explores how strengths like ambitions, positive experiences, and character strengths can empower individuals to navigate challenges and achieve greater well-being.

This article discusses the benefits of reframing clinical approaches to the assessment and treatment of older adults who have a mental illness to incorporate the four components of positive psychiatry: <sup>[1]</sup> positive mental health outcomes, <sup>[2]</sup> positive psychosocial characteristics and environmental factors, <sup>[3]</sup> biology of positive psychiatry constructs, and <sup>[4]</sup> positive psychiatry

interventions including preventative approaches. We offer insights and strategies to clinicians to integrate positive psychiatry into practice.

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## Introduction

Mental health care in America has led to a storied past. Once cloaked in superstition and misunderstanding, science has stealthily moved the field into a discoverable realm where we now have validated treatments for disorders like depression, schizophrenia, and anxious distress. Numerous evidence-based studies have demonstrated the benefits of psychotherapy in correcting negative automatic thoughts and medication management, whose aim is to normalize neurotransmitters that have gone awry. Neuroscience has linked genetics, epigenetics, and intergenerational trauma as root causes of some mental health conditions. External factors such as environmental stressors contributing to emotional dysregulation have been connected to the experience of divorce, financial, and food insecurity, together with acute life situations such as war and natural disasters.

The primary objective of psychiatry is to manage mental health disorders. Historically, the field has focused much of its clinical resources and scientific research inquiry on understanding the causes of mental illnesses and advancing therapeutic treatments. Psychiatric modalities are problem-oriented, targeting symptoms and precipitating factors such as physical, psychological, or social events that lead to the change in affect. While this approach has been beneficial in alleviating suffering, clinicians practicing in psychiatry often fail to dig deep enough into their toolbox to reach individuals' intrinsic reserves. Failing to recognize or acknowledge strengths that may contribute to the recovery process—clinically, overlooking positive aspects that can bolster wellness. Health can be defined broadly as the absence of disease or impairment. It is a state of balance, an equilibrium established within individuals and between themselves and their social and physical environment <sup>[1]</sup>.

Positive Psychiatry (PS) is a scientific approach within clinical psychiatry that aims to understand and promote optimal mental health by focusing on individual strengths, resilience, and positive experiences. It utilizes assessments and interventions supporting well-being by examining positive psychosocial characteristics (PPC). The aim is to improve well-being through psychosocial/behavioral and biologically based interventions. It is a global approach to improving an individual's psychological state of health.

Promoting positive emotions may help build character while directly and almost indeed indirectly decreasing negative experiences while providing insight into their origins. It is here we reinforce that a *build what is strong* approach to psychiatry rather than simply fixing what is wrong can enhance all-around positive mental health outcomes.

Research supports that an individual's positive perception, experience, and affective evaluations of life reinforce subjective well-being [2]. Global life satisfaction combines intrapersonal and contextual factors that contribute to the overall perception of subjective happiness and positive state affect [3]. All individuals, even the most troubled, seek relief from sadness and concern and strive for contentment, satisfaction, and joy. People want to live meaningfully and purposefully, building upon their strengths and seeking to understand their weaknesses so they can take corrective measures. Refocusing treatments and interventions on factors that may buffer against further declines in emotional health may enhance optimal functioning. Clinicians should adopt a treatment approach that seeks client qualities such as strength of character, ambitions, and exposure to positive life experiences. Building on an individual's core values and beliefs can foster positive growth and mitigate negative assumptions.

Historically, positive psychiatry originated in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its roots took shape when physician William James promoted the benefits of positive emotional beliefs when applying the practice of the *mind-cure* to his patients. Self-actualization is the cornerstone of pioneer Abraham Maslow's seminal work, whose core concepts are rooted in realizing one's full potential. Social psychologist Marie Jahoda's early research focused on the effects of unemployment on mental health; however, she had an immense impact on the field by introducing the key concept of Positive Mental Health (PMH) [4].

Contemporary psychologist Seligman reintroduced the idea in the 1990s when there was a push to reorient psychological science to build upon the most positive qualities of an individual. These inherent strengths included individual optimism, courage, work ethic, future mindfulness, interpersonal skills, capacity for pleasure, insight, and social responsibility. Since then, more empirically supported studies have been conducted to build out the importance of this practice.

## **Mental Health Outcomes-Embracing Positivity as a grounding construct**

Fostering positivity in mental health care is a known benefit of improving mood, outlook on life, and degree of social connectedness. Several components make up positivity in psychiatry. Individual well-

being is the cornerstone of positivity in psychiatry. Well-being is more than the absence of physical or psychological problems; it encompasses perceived happiness, self-acceptance, life satisfaction, and a sense of purpose. Research has linked qualities associated with subjective well-being to living longer <sup>[5][6]</sup> <sup>[7]</sup>.

Several additional characteristics significantly frame positive mental health outcomes. An individual's degree of perceived stress plays a significant role in health-promoting versus health-damaging behaviors and responses. There is a strong link between self-rated health, mental health problems, and both future health and life expectancy <sup>[8][9]</sup>. The surge in America's aging population has sparked new research on successful psychosocial aging, highlighting the multifaceted dimensions of psychological well-being. Intrinsic qualities that we use to favorably evaluate our lives as we age, such as positive thoughts and feelings, are conceptualized as optimism, and a sense of purpose in life has been shown to reduce the risk of incident disease and prevent premature mortality <sup>[10]</sup>. Posttraumatic growth, or an individual's shift toward positivity after experiencing a traumatic life event, is a known phenomenon where people report positive outcomes following highly stressful situations as direct learning or a result of coping <sup>[11]</sup>. Some examples of positive psychological change are increased interpersonal strength, embracing spirituality, and identifying new possibilities in their lives. Another aspect that should not be overlooked is that despite suffering severe mental health conditions, people can still recover and experience happiness. Happiness is subjective and can be described on a spectrum. It is based upon this that even those with severe mental health disorders can experience joy and wellness <sup>[12]</sup>. Prevention in mental health has been commonly practiced with a focus on the child and adolescent population. New science has reshaped our understanding of brain health, pushing us to develop insight into syndromes such as postpartum psychosis, posttraumatic stress disorder, poststroke mood disorder, and dementia prevention <sup>[13][14]</sup>.

## Positive Psychosocial and Environmental Factors

To achieve the goal of positive outcomes in mental health, we must consider mediating factors such as individual characteristics and external environmental factors. Positive psychological traits are inherent qualities that can bolster well-being. Research investigating positive psychological traits supports a strong association in its contribution to wellness <sup>[15][16][17]</sup>. Intrinsic factors like resilience, optimism, personal mastery, coping self-efficacy, and social engagement are essential to spirituality and religiosity. Resilience can be defined as the ability to successfully adapt when experiencing stressful life events,

trauma, and chronic adversity <sup>[18]</sup>. The concept has been extensively studied as protective, providing a form of stress inoculation or barrier to the deleterious effects of future insults <sup>[19]</sup>. Specific character traits, optimism, self-efficacy, and social integration are well-studied concepts for fostering a positive outlook on life. Those who demonstrate these qualities develop inner ego strength, which self-activates when faced with adversity<sup>[20]</sup>. Spirituality and wisdom ground individuals, and these qualities are associated with transcendent topics, particularly finding meaning in life, empathy, and altruism, which are all linked to a better understanding of and skill set when navigating life.

Environmental factors are known to contribute to positivity and wellness. Family dynamics, support systems, and general health contribute to better outcomes. Loneliness, social isolation, and relationship quality are known risk factors that contribute to poor mental health <sup>[21]</sup>. Having a strong support system and social network has been shown to reduce the impact of depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders <sup>[22]</sup>.

## **Biological Contributions to Positivity in Psychiatry**

The chance of an individual developing a specific mental health disorder is higher in those with family members who have mental illness, in particular, first-degree relatives <sup>[23]</sup>. Genomic research investigating psychiatric disorders aims to understand the genetic contributions to mental health. Genetic discovery or genetic pathways, treatment selection, pharmacogenetics, and neuroimaging genomics optimize treatments based on a patient's genetic profile. Several biomarkers promote mental health. Allostatic load, telomere length, and oxidative stress have been extensively studied and may play an important role downstream when activated during prolonged exposure to environmental stressors <sup>[24]</sup>. Clinicians should consider that these biomarkers directly impact mental health through sustained exposure to stressors that can weaken the immune system, increase inflammation, and cause a negative physical response. Research has shown that positivity, including optimism, hope, and personal mastery, are protective; therefore, clinicians should cultivate these personal character traits <sup>[25]</sup>.

## **Interventions: Building Positivity in Geriatric Psychiatry**

Geropsychiatry is a niche field in mental health. Clinicians in this area of psychiatry focus on the complex care of older people's specific health and mental healthcare needs. Care of older individuals poses different challenges because they inherently face a higher proportion of disease burden, which often

negatively impacts their functional abilities, contributing to physical declines, including loss of muscle mass, sensory deficits such as poor hearing and speech, and memory impairment such as dementia. These changes, some of which are related to the normal aging process, can contribute to frailty and disability, requiring dependence on a caregiver and, in some cases, relocation to a residential care facility.

Clinicians working in geropsychiatry should move away from the idea that aging inevitably means physical and cognitive decline and instead focus on the potential for positive and healthy aging. This potential is grounded in research demonstrating the continued presence of neuroplasticity in older adults. The scaffolding theory of cognitive aging (STAC) asserts that structural and functional changes in aging occur; however, compensatory cognitive scaffolding compensates in an attempt to delay cognitive declines [26]. STAC is a powerful conceptual tool supported by extensive neuroimaging literature that represents the brain as a dynamic adaptive structure that often counteracts damaging insults with the engagement of supplementary neural reorganization [27]. Embracing the notion of neuroplasticity, exploring external neuroprotective factors such as resilience, and providing guidance on pro-health cognitive strategies and environmental support may alleviate some age-related changes, decrease feelings of depression and anxiety, and reverse these declines [28].

Complementary interventions can enhance traditional treatments. Positive psychiatric interventions focused on lifestyle have been thoroughly researched and demonstrate favorable results. Notably, exercise has proven to be as effective as medication in some cases [29]. Exercise can elevate mood, potentially prevent the development of depression, and alleviate feelings of intense anxiety. Furthermore, physical activity can improve impulse control, attention, and focus while mitigating psychological states like learned helplessness and managing immediate behaviors.

A healthy diet and good sleep hygiene can contribute to a positive outlook and improve mental health. Studies investigating associations between diet and cognitive health reinforce the importance of well-balanced nutrition to maintain a healthy gut microbiome, a factor closely related to positive mental health outcomes [30]. Restorative sleep is essential to recharge the body but critical in maintaining cognitive functioning. Older adults often experience disruptions in sleep patterns that lead to insomnia, excessive daytime sleepiness, and, sometimes, a reverse in their sleep cycle. These changes in circadian rhythms can negatively impact daily functioning, contribute to cognitive decline, alter mood, increase the risk of falls, and increase the chance of delirium [31][32].

## Conclusion and Clinical Implications of Positive Psychiatry

Promoting healthy aging requires a holistic approach, encompassing physical, mental, and social well-being. Maintaining bodily fitness, optimal nutrition, and a healthy weight are foundational. When clinicians assess older adults with mental health concerns, they should integrate a biopsychosocial perspective, considering factors such as psychosocial resilience and cognitive reframing. Interventions should prioritize personalized diet, sleep hygiene, and exercise regimens to enhance physical well-being. Furthermore, positive psychiatry underscores the importance of mental health professionals utilizing their medical training within this biopsychosocial framework. This approach aims to manage mental illness, cultivate positive outcomes, and optimize the quality of life for older adults.

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