

# Premier's Anika Foundation Youth Depression Awareness Scholarship

## Positive psychology in PDHPE and beyond to prevent depression and promote resilience

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## Introduction

Forty-five percent of Australians aged 16-85 have suffered at some point in their life from either anxiety or mood or substance disorders (Australian Bureau of Statistic: Australian Social Trends 2009).

Currently one in five Australians will suffer from depression in any given 12 month period (Australian Bureau of Statistics: National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing of Adults 1997).

The incidence of mental illness has increased in successive generations of Australian youth. About a quarter of teenagers suffer significant psychological distress at any one time and over 7000 young people per year are admitted to hospital after intentionally self-harming.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that depression will be the number one cause of disability in both the developed and developing worlds by 2030 (WHO: The Global Burden of Disease 2008).

That means that our current crop of Year 7 boys and girls will face a greater threat from depression than from *any other disease* by the time they reach 30 years of age.

Clearly many children thrive despite society's influence, but *too many* of our youth are unaware, or apathetic as they race headlong into what the WHO predicts will be a depression *epidemic* by 2030.

School children spend more hours per week face-to-face with their teachers than with any other significant adult.

My study proposes that the application of Positive Psychology in Schools (PBIS) will not only address depression today, but the prevalence of depression and other mental illness conditions in the future. My ideas stem from the research by Karen Reivich and Martin Seligman who state that "Positive Psychology can help inoculate primary, secondary and college age students against depression." (Reivich et al. 2005, Seligman et al. 1999)

Depression is influenced by three factors: biology, behaviour and environment.

Schools can do nothing in regard to a student's biological set-point. Some students will be more pre-disposed to depression than others. However, schools can do a great deal in regard to behaviour and environment.

Behavioural skills can be taught via Evidence based programs and staff should exhibit, and promote resilience building behaviours

Schools need to consider their *brand*. What kind of environment are they creating? All staff need to *buy in*.

Positive Psychology is not only used to prevent depression or treat mental illness, but also aims at creating people who *flourish*.

Martin Seligman and Chris Peterson came up with 24 “Signature Strengths” that are valued across all cultures and religions. The Strengths provide much of the framework for an educational model. They are:

1. **Love of Learning** - You love learning new things, whether you are in a class or on your own. You find opportunities to learn wherever you go and whatever you do.
2. **Bravery** - You don't shrink from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain. You speak up for what is right even if you encounter opposition and act on convictions even if they are unpopular.
3. **Vitality** - You approach life with zest, enthusiasm, and energy. For you, life is an adventure.
4. **Leadership** - You excel at the tasks of leadership: encouraging a group to get things done and preserving harmony within the group by making everyone feel included.
5. **Appreciation of beauty and excellence** - You notice and appreciate beauty, excellence, and skilled performance in all domains of life.
6. **Humour** - You like to laugh and tease. You try to see the light side of all situations.
7. **Creativity** - Thinking of new ways to do things is a crucial part of who you are. You are never content with doing something the conventional way if a better way is possible.
8. **Curiosity** - You take an interest in for its own sake. You find subjects and topics fascinating, and love exploring and discovering.
9. **Open-mindedness** - You tend to think things through and examine them from all sides. You don't jump to conclusions and are able to change your mind in light of evidence.
10. **Perspective** - You are able to provide wise counsel to others. You have ways of looking at the world that make sense to yourself and to other people.
11. **Persistence** - You work hard to finish what you start. No matter what the project is, you get it done in time.
12. **Integrity** - You are an honest person, not only speaking the truth but also living your life in a genuine and authentic way.
13. **Love** - You value close relationships with others. The people to whom you feel most close are the same people who feel most close to you.
14. **Kindness** - You are kind and generous to others, and you are never too busy to do a favour.
15. **Social Intelligence** - You are aware of the motives and feelings of other people. You know what to do to fit into different social situations, and you know what to do to put others at ease.
16. **Fairness** - Treating all people fairly is one of your most important principles. You do not let your personal feelings bias your decisions about other people.
17. **Gratitude** - You are aware of the good things that happen to you, and you never take them for granted. You always take the time to express your thanks.
18. **Hope** - You expect the best in the future, and you work to achieve it. You believe that the future is something that you can control.
19. **Spirituality** - You have strong and coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe.
20. **Forgiveness and mercy** - You forgive those who have done you wrong. Your guiding principle is mercy and not revenge.

21. **Self-regulation** - You regulate what you feel and what you do. You are a disciplined person.
22. **Citizenship** - You excel as a member of a group. You are a loyal and dedicated teammate.
23. **Humility/Modesty** - You do not seek the spotlight, preferring to let your accomplishments speak for themselves. You do not regard yourself as special.
24. **Prudence** - You are a careful person. You do not say or do things that you might later regret.

You can take your own Signature Strengths Test here: <http://uat.viacharacter.org/>

Positive Psychology aims to help people not only identify their signature strengths but also encourages them to engage their strengths in the pursuit of something larger than themselves. In doing this people create meaning in their lives, and having meaning serves as a protective factor against depression.

My tour was designed not only to see Positive Psychology explicitly in action in schools, but also to meet people whose philosophies either consciously or subconsciously are in keeping with Positive Psychology.

## **Itinerary**

My tour took place between 13<sup>th</sup> November – 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010.

*15<sup>th</sup> Nov – 28<sup>th</sup> November: United Kingdom*

In the UK I met four leading thinkers in education.

### ***Sir Ken Robinson***

Sir Ken Robinson, PhD is an internationally recognized leader in the development of education, creativity and innovation. He works with governments in Europe, Asia and the USA, with international agencies, Fortune 500 companies and some of the world's leading cultural organizations. I attended a seminar with Sir Ken Robinson, and then had the opportunity to sit down with him one-on-one in order to discuss my research.



**Dan Haesler with Sir Ken Robinson**

### **Key points for discussion**

- Too many people endure, rather than enjoy what they do
- Education is very good at showing students what they are/aren't good at academically

- Choices in education are often guided more by what you are good at, rather than passionate about
- More people enjoying their school/work would see a decrease in depression rate

### ***Jenny Fox Eades***

I attended three primary schools which run Jenny Fox Eades' "Celebrating Strengths" program. I also had the chance to help facilitate a session with Jenny in one of the schools. Jenny is a writer and education advisor. She is an associate member of The Centre for Applied Positive Psychology [www.cappeu.org](http://www.cappeu.org) and a founder member of Positive Workplace International. She is the author of three books and has also written for the The Times, Junior Education and Early Years Educator.

#### **Key points of discussion**

- The work on resilience has to start in primary school
- The language of strengths gives the school community an alternative way of discussing not only what the students can do, but also (and more importantly) who they are.

### ***Ian Morris***

Wellington College – Ian is also the author of "Learning to Ride Elephants – Teaching Happiness in Schools"

#### **Key points of discussion**

- Students from all socioeconomic backgrounds have issues. None are more serious than others. They are just different.
- The teaching of positive psychology can be done in stand-alone classes, but must be part of a wider school approach.

### ***Richard Gerver***

Former British Headteacher of the Year and author of "Creating Tomorrow's Schools Today"

#### **Key points of discussion**

- Richard turned Grange Primary, a failing school into a top performer (based on Ofsted report) by incorporating Sir Ken Robinson's principles of allowing students and staff to explore their interests.
- He improved numeracy and literacy by engaging the kids in school, rather than focusing on numeracy and literacy in isolation
- He made school somewhere the students wanted to be

*29<sup>th</sup> Nov – 17<sup>th</sup> Dec – USA & Canada*

### ***John Yeager***

Culver Academy, Indiana – Author of Smart Strengths

#### **Key points of discussion**

- Students and staff fully aware of their signature strengths and how to engage them

- Using the concept of signature strengths in student management - Shadow strengths – when strengths go too far eg. The child whose signature strength is humour and playfulness, learning how to moderate this in class.

### ***The Youth Empowerment Project (YEP) and Nola Truth Academy – New Orleans***

#### **Key points of discussion**

- In New Orleans it is not a case of how many kids suffer depression, it's more a case of to what extent do they suffer
- The YEP work with paroled teenagers. They engage them in learning with mentors and give them the skills to redefine their lives.
- The notion that some students are unteachable is simply not entertained

### ***Dominic Randolph***

Headteacher Riverdale School, New York

#### **Key points of discussion**

- How can we redefine education so that students really are at the centre of the learning process?
- How can schools support the students in their journey to discover who they are and how they can contribute to society
- What does a school in the 21<sup>st</sup> century look like?

### ***KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) Schools***

The Bronx, New York

#### **Key points of discussion**

- KIPP schools are looking at choosing seven or eight of the signature strengths that students should aspire to

### ***Dr Jane Gillham and Mark Linkins***

Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania

#### **Key points of discussion**

- Examined the renowned Penn Resiliency Program and the Swarthmore “Positive Education” program. A program written by Jane Gillham and Martin Seligman.

### ***Tayyab Rashid***

One of Martin Seligman's colleagues in the implementation of Geelong Grammar's Positive Psychology program. Toronto, Canada

#### **Key points of discussion**

- Use of different perspectives (rather than solely the self-reporting survey on the internet) to ascertain signature strengths in students. Engaging parents, teachers and family members to identify the strengths they see in the students. Where there is correlation, it was determined that these are the key strengths students should embrace.

## ***Therese Joyce***

EF College, Toronto. Therese presented at the International Positive Psychology Association World Congress

### **Key points of discussion**

- Instigation of a Positive Psychology program for staff.
- Demonstrated how the program improved workplace engagement, self-efficacy and job satisfaction.

## ***Dr Howard Cutler***

Phoenix, Arizona – Author of the Dalai Lama’s “Art of Happiness” books.

### **Key points of discussion**

- The contrast of East vs West approaches to life.
- We see value only in the “product”, whereas Eastern culture values more so the “process”
- What role can mindfulness play as a protective factor
- Connectedness in the community as a protective factor
- How can this be applied to education, and what benefits would this have in terms of student wellbeing?

## **Findings**

Schools built around a model of Positive Psychology:

1. Establish, build and promote positive relationships amongst and between all members of the school community.
2. Identify signature strengths in students and staff
3. Recognise students strengths in all fields (including those that fall outside a traditional academic framework)
4. Empower students and staff to use their strengths in the pursuit of something larger than themselves
5. Ensure they have a flourishing staff through an effective review system.
6. Have a “brand” that staff, parents, students and the community buy into.
7. Understand that academic performance is dependent on student wellbeing
8. Understand that school connectedness accounts for 50 percent of the variables that contribute to Youth Depression (By comparison, parental connectedness accounts for only 25 percent)
9. Value the process of learning more than the product (exam results) of learning
10. Have a proactive, rather than reactive approach to mental wellbeing
11. Provide opportunities for students to be “mindful” with allocated “quiet times/areas”
12. Value and promote community outreach work

## **Strategies for NSW schools**

Ideally the whole school plays its part. But as a starting point, PDHPE is the perfect forum to implement these strategies. The author has done successfully in his own school.

However, in order for any of these strategies to be implemented to its fullest potential, staff should have a working understanding of Positive Psychology.

Some recommended reading:

*Happier* – Tal Ben Shahar

*The Element* – Sir Ken Robinson

*The Optimist Child* – Martin Seligman

*Celebrating Strengths* – Jenny Fox Eades

*Creating Tomorrow's Schools Today* – Richard Gerver

*Positive Psychology for Dummies*

### ***The Penn Resiliency Program***

<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/prpsum.htm>. Schools can apply to the University of Pennsylvania to run the PRP in their schools. It is based on the principles of Positive Psychology, and is part of the Geelong Grammar approach to Positive Education.

### ***The RAP Program – Queensland University of Technology***

<http://www.rap.qut.edu.au/> QUT run a similar program (and nowhere near as expensive as the PRP) that has been independently studied and shown to improve students' resilience and lower rates of depression.

### ***Celebrating strengths***

<http://www.celebratingstrengths.com/> Aimed predominantly at primary schools, Jenny Fox-Eades' program is a wonderful example of how a whole school community can implement a strengths culture at your school.

### **Build a community outreach program**

Students look to engage their strengths in the service of others. The NSW DEC has a great deal of info on their site as to how to set this up.

<http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/volunteering/students/index.htm>

### ***20 percent time***

Primary schools give over one day per week for "Enrichment" days. These can be activities run by the staff based on their passions/interests (in the first instance). Successful programs would then see engagement from parents and others in the community.

In high schools, if a subject has five periods a week, one period can be given over to a private research project where students pursue a passion/interest. Students present back, but are not marked.



### ***Mindful moments***

Schools build in 4 x 5minute blocks when students take time to reflect. eg. First five minutes of Period 1, again after Recess, after Lunch, and before the end of the day. Teachers can either lead, or use music to facilitate. There are numerous websites that offer free guided relaxation downloads.

### ***Activities to get started***

Below are two additional activities that were designed by the author and Ray Francis at Emanuel School, Sydney. They have since been published in John Yeager's SMART Strengths book published 2011.

### ***In my element video/Photostory – A resource for staff and students***

Sir Ken Robinson defines "*The Element*" as the place where your natural talents (strengths) and passions meet. To be in your element is to be in a state of flow.

This activity allows the students to explore their *Element* by identifying their strengths (VIA, StrengthsFinder 2.0 or own perceived) and identifying their passions or affinities.

By using commercially available software, (eg. Microsoft Movie Maker, Photostory or Apple's iMovie) students create a short presentation that demonstrates their strengths and passions and, crucially, how they interrelate.

This presents a number of cross curricular teaching opportunities.

Student presentations can be viewed in class for peer discussion or reflection based on the needs of your class, and can be stored on a database so authorised teaching staff can access them as see the pupil as a *child first*; student second.

### **Random acts of kindness – What's in it for me?**

*"Why should I be nice to people? They aren't nice to me..."* This is a common response from adolescents when we try and engage them in the notion of being "kind."

Researchers will tell us that because of the adolescent brain, the teaching of such concepts need to demonstrate: "What's in it for me?"

The following activity has been shown in a variety of settings to do just that.

Each member of the class is assigned a random "Secret Buddy." Over the course of a number of weeks each person should perform one or two acts of kindness for their "Buddy" per week.

Each week the group is surveyed anonymously as to how happy they were with the act of kindness they received (if indeed they identified it) as well as how happy they felt after performing an act of kindness.

Depending on your class you can add more questions relating to how their mental wellbeing was affected by either giving or receiving the act of kindness.

Typically over the course of three weeks or more, students report that *performing* acts of kindness makes them happier than *receiving*. Furthermore, students will often report that feeling happy improves their mental wellbeing, so they can generalise by saying that being kind to other people is actually good for their health... *and that's what's in it for me.*

Included below are the findings from our 2010 activity with fifty 15 and 16 year olds.

Only four percent said that *receiving* an Act of Kindness made them happier than *performing* one.

Seventy-six percent said that the more thought/effort they put into *performing* an Act of Kindness, the happier they felt because of it.

Ninety-four percent said the happier they felt, the better (in terms of mental wellbeing) they felt.

Seventy-two percent said because of doing the “Secret Buddy Activity” they can now see how doing Acts of Kindness for others actually improves their mental wellbeing.

### **Additional recommendations – Stemming from my tour and subsequent work**

The NSW Government, DEC, Schools and all their major stake holders should:

1. Acknowledge that the prevalence of mental health disorders in Australian children and young people is unacceptably high.
2. Commit a significant proportion of youth mental health funding towards the establishment of a national research strategy to identify the most effective model of student support services in Australia.
3. Encourage more research into the benefits of Mindfulness.
4. Should ensure that at the very least, the proposed PDHPE Australian Curriculum addresses mental wellbeing in a proactive manner.

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