Improving Mental Health and Wellbeing at Work through the Science of Positive Psychology

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Presentation by Jasper Buys, MSocSc (Organisational Psychology), FMCHC Director, Impact Action Lab at Alberta Innovates
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Despite many organizations returning to in-person or hybrid work and most provincial and federal public health restrictions lifted, life and work in 2022/23 has not really returned to normal for many of us. In this session, we will begin by looking at how we are doing as we head into 2023 and some of the key ongoing challenges to mental health and wellbeing for Canadians.

After touching on mental health and workplace trends, we will turn to the question: ‘What can we do about these challenges?’ The relatively new science of Positive Psychology has some ideas. After a brief introduction to this field, we will turn to three proven and practical Positive Psychology steps you and your team can take to improve mental health and wellbeing: i.) Building authenticity, ii.) savouring positive emotions, and iii.) strengths spotting.
1. How are we doing as we head into 2023?

Key challenges to Mental Health and Wellbeing for Canadians
Mental health and mental illness in Canada

- Mental health ≠ mental illness
- We all have (varying) mental health
- Mental illness directly or indirectly affects all Canadians
- 1 in 5 Canadians experience a mental health problem or illness every year
- Major depression and anxiety disorders collectively effect 10% of the Canadian population
- Racism, poverty, homelessness, discrimination, and systemic inequality can worsen mental health
- $79.9 billion was the projected economic cost of mental illnesses to the Canadian healthcare and social support system in 2021
- The COVID-19 Pandemic worsened already declining mental health
- A Q4 2020 GoC survey found:
  - 13% of Canadians screened positive for Generalised Anxiety Disorder
  - 15% screened positive for Major Depressive Disorder
  - 16% reported increased alcohol consumption
Zoom Poll #1
Our mental health in 2022/23

"After two years, Canadians are really feeling overwhelmed and exhausted"
Margaret Eaton, national CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)

"The information we have now about the impact of COVID-19 on the world's mental health is just the tip of the iceberg"
WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

“While more than a third of disability claims under Canadian employer-sponsored benefits plans in 2022 were due to mental-health reasons, just two-thirds (63 per cent) of organizations are addressing this risk effectively”
Benefits Canada Staff, citing findings from a Mercer survey
Zoom Poll #2
2. What can we do to support our own and our teams’ mental health?

The science of Positive Psychology has some ideas
What is positive psychology?

- Contemporary Positive Psychology was introduced by Professors Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the early 2000’s
- The science of well-being, excellence, and optimal human functioning
- If traditional Psychology is mainly about diagnosis and treatment of mental illness, Positive Psychology is about assessing and enabling optimal mental health and wellbeing
Zoom Poll #3
3. Three proven Positive Psychology steps you and your team can take to improve mental health and wellbeing
3.1 Increasing authenticity and decreasing toxic positivity

- Brené Brown on authenticity: *It is not comfortable but also not excruciating for those that embrace vulnerability and are not prone to debilitating shame*
- Practice and model authenticity, but be mindful of the authenticity to relationship ratio
- Toxic positivity and what to say instead

**Two things you can do:**

- **Brené Brown’s two-word exercise:**
  - Start a weekly team meeting or 1:1 by going around and answering the question ‘how are you doing/feeling’ in two words.
  - No explanation and no comments, but do it regularly for at least 2-3 months

- **Stopping toxic positivity:**
  - Avoid the urge to say, “just be/stay positive,” “look on the bright side,” or “everything happens for a reason” the next time you feel negative emotions, or someone shares a challenge or struggle.
  - Rather say something like “Sometimes, things happen to us and they’re very difficult and we can’t really make sense of them. And it just sucks and that’s okay,” or “I don’t even know what to say - that must be really hard/sad/upsetting.”
3.2 Savouring positive emotions

Two things you can do:

- **Expand your emotional vocabulary**
  - Review the Berkeley Well-Being Institute’s Positive Emotions [article and resources](unizin.org)
  - The next time you feel ‘good’ or ‘happy,’ can you expand and add a little nuance?

- **Notice and savour positive emotions**
  - Gratitude journalling
  - Keeping an eye out for the good in your day/week, and then **savouring** it for 5-10 seconds
  - Test and improve your **positivity ratio**

*Image from ‘Broaden and Build Theory of Positive Emotions - Psychology of Human Emotion: An Open Access Textbook (unizin.org)’*
3.3 Strengths Spotting

- The VIA Character Strengths classification is Positive Psychology’s ‘diagnostic tool’ of what is good with you.
- You can take the survey and get your results for free [here](#).
- Once you know your own strengths, you can start noticing them and applying them when faced with an opportunity or challenge.
- To take it to next level, notice and call out when your team members exhibit their character strengths (this is called strengths spotting).
## Deeper dive into strengths spotting

This and additional character strengths resources available on the VIA Institute on Character’s website on the resources and activities page: [Strengths-Based Activities & Exercises | VIA Institute (viacharacter.org)](https://viacharacter.org/activities"

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Zoom Poll #4
Thank you!
Jasper Buys is an Organisational Psychologist, Functional Medicine Certified Health Coach, and Canadian Mental Health Association Certified Psychological Health and Safety Advisor.

Jasper is currently a Director at the Alberta Innovates Impact Action Lab and has over 13 years of experience as a Canadian not-for-profit and professional association board director. He specializes in strategy and facilitation and is currently studying mental health policy and impact science. Before moving to the public sector, Jasper was a Consulting Manager at EY’s People Advisory Services practice in Western Canada, focused on Change Management, Leadership, and Culture.

While at EY, Jasper launched a national workplace mental health and wellness initiative and was active as a Mindfulness Champion within the firm. In his free time Jasper enjoys singing in choirs, downhill skiing, and reading science fiction.

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Sources and Useful Links


• Canadian Mental Health Association National Website


• VIA Institute on Character. 10 Ways to Be Spontaneous with Strengths-Spotting. Resource retrieved from https://www.viacharacter.org/resources/activities/10-ways-to-be-spontaneous-with-strengths-spotting

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*Health continuum according to Travis (Travis, 1984)* in Bertsch & Osterman (2011) *The Effect of wellness brand awareness on expected and perceived service quality* article on ResearchGate

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