New History of Guidance in Ireland

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POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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"You have changed my life," Grainne beamed across the table as we began our fifth session. When she came to me first, she was confused and frustrated about what she wanted to do. Whilst still uncertain about a specific career path, she now had a few options and no longer felt the pressure to choose a job for life. After all, research shows we have on average three careers in our lifetime (1). Choosing a career or a college course is not a life sentence, rather a small step on our journey to realise and grow our psychological and intellectual resources. This is what Grainne referred to as life-changing.

Helping individuals grow their resources is one of the aims of Positive Psychology. It is a science of well-being that endeavours to recognise and develop factors that allow people to thrive (2). Psychologists studied the top performers, the happiest, most resilient and fulfilled individuals. They examined how differently they thought and behaved, and following completion of their research, they created over a hundred evidence-based interventions to help people flourish. They can be easily applied in Guidance Counselling. Let's review two of these interventions and how they can transform students' lives.

Character strengths

In a recent study, Guidance Counsellors who used Character Strengths in their career interviews improved the chances of their clients securing employment or a college course by 20%. Feedback from clients 3 months later showed that Guidance Counsellors using the strength-based approach were evaluated much more favourably by their clients and their evaluation continued to improve over time. Strength-based counselling was grounded on VIA character strengths classification developed by positive psychologists (3). According to the authors, character strengths are trait-like qualities, which are inherently fulfilling, morally valued and measureable. Some researchers call them talents which we put effort into developing (4). Imagine you were born with an aptitude for music. Unless you put in long hours practicing the piano, chances are, your musical talent will not become your strength. The same applies to Character Strengths, which is a positive psychological measurement of Good Character.

Guidance Counsellors can use character strengths in many different ways. Firstly, they can help clients identify what their top strengths are and discuss how they use them every day. Mere completion of the VIA character strengths questionnaire improves clients' well-being and decreases any depressive symptoms they have for up to 6 months (5). Research shows that using strengths is associated with well-being (6) and happiness (7). The effects of using signature strengths in a new way increases happiness and reduces depressive symptoms for up to 6 months (8). Therefore, Guidance Counsellors can discuss and encourage their clients to use their strengths when preparing for an exam, for a new job, dealing with school challenges or that the signature strength is 'Social Intelligence', yet they get into trouble at school for constantly being late, rather than asking them to improve their time keeping, Guidance Counsellors can focus on their strength and discuss the impact of their lateness on their colleagues and teachers and come up with ways in which they can use their social intelligence strength to come to classes on time.

Resilience

Research shows that teaching young people resilience reduces their conduct problems (9) and significantly lessens their anxiety and depression for many years (10). It increases their optimism (11) which is responsible for achieving success in life. It is a life skill that can be easily taught when discussing school, family and career aspirations with a Guidance Counsellor. Resilient adolescents explain bad events in their lives in a specific way. When they do badly at school, have an argument with someone or are not successful in getting the part time job they wanted, they don't blame their intelligence, personality or any other qualities which are hard to change. Rather, they say they didn't work hard enough, or that the exam was too difficult, or that the strategy they used didn't work. On the other hand, non-resilient children beat themselves up for their misfortunes and consider themselves unlucky or stupid. Guidance Counsellors can help them change this attitude by providing them with alternative ways of describing their experiences.
their bad times are temporary. They believe that if their teacher was cross with them or they did poorly at their test, if they make an effort to change this situation, things will change and good times will come back. This attitude is easy for Guidance Counsellors to spot when talking to the student and once recognised can be easily challenged leading to changes in the way they view their situation.

Finally, resilient children don't catastrophize about their negative situation. When they fight with their friends, they don't make generalised statements such as: nobody likes me. When they fail their exams, they don't say: my life is over. Instead they are able to recognise that it's just one bad thing in their lives among many good things. When their relationship with a friend breaks down they recognise they are not alone as they have other friends they can rely on. When they fail their maths exam, they acknowledge that they passed other exams. Guidance Counsellors can help students develop their resilience by challenging their unhelpful thoughts and re-framing them in a way that can help them grow.

Positive Psychology interventions are based on scientific evidence. They have already changed the lives of many students; like Grainne who learnt to recognise her Character Strengths and use them to deal with challenges in her life. Her new, resilient way of thinking, helped her bounce back after adversities and motivated her to keep searching for the right job. Positive psychology has a lot to offer in guidance counselling. It's an extra step Guidance Counsellors can take to transform their students' lives.

1. Cascio, W.F. (2010). The changing world of work. In P.A. Linley, S Harrington, Jolanta Burke is a positive psychologist and PhD researcher in Trinity College Dublin. She is the first author of ‘Applying Positive Psychology in Guidance Counselling’ chapter in the latest NCCE Handbook for Guidance Counsellors and a columnist for the InTouch magazine about Positive Education. She is a graduate member of the Psychological Society of Ireland. For more information about activities applied in education, go to www.jumpp.ie

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Guideline

THE INSTITUTE OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS NEWSLETTER

N. Garcia (Eds) Oxford handbook of positive psychology and work. New York: Oxford University Press
5. Seligman, 2004