

The Pursuit of Dreams: Utilising Positive Psychology to Win Without Losing Oneself

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ABSTRACT

In the last few decades, there has been a surge in the number of competitive exams held in India for various jobs. For students in almost every field, the route to success is via these national and state level competitive exams. Seats are few and competition is strife; thus stress is perhaps an unavoidable companion in such journeys. The aim of this study is to understand how students who appear for competitive exams cope with high levels of stress, and how they react in the face of failure and helplessness. An attempt was made through this research to explore what keeps such people going, in the midst of uncertainty and self-doubt, and how they can be helped using Positive Psychology. Towards this end, semi structured interviews were conducted with 15 students with the help of an interview schedule constructed by the authors. These students belonged to three categories: those who have achieved success, those still preparing, and those who were preparing earlier but have now switched to some other career option. After every interview, a trial intervention was conducted with the ABCDE method (Seligman, 2002) during which participants were taught how to use this method to objectively review events and situations of their life (Hall, 2007) and introduce a positive orientation towards the adversities they had faced. The data was analysed using Thematic Analysis. The trial intervention was easy to teach and was found to be immensely successful according to participants' feedback on how feasible it seemed to apply to their daily lives. This study makes a call for positive psychology interventions to be introduced for students in high stress environments, like coaching institutes, and demonstrates a simple way to make a start.

Key Words : Optimism, Stress, Positive Psychology

INTRODUCTION

Life consists of different phases and the phase of acquiring an education is considered to be of paramount importance. It is often said that the years spent in acquiring education determine the path for the future for most people. Apart from the development of intellectual skills and gaining knowledge, education helps in building an individual's personality and makes him capable of dealing with life's challenges. Furthermore, it is through education that a person realizes their potential, and hones it. Thus, denying one access to education is to deny one the very basic right to be a complete human being. This is reflected in the fact that in India, education is now recognized as a

fundamental human right.

Though the importance of education is globally recognized, education carries a certain distinctive respect in India that would hardly be found in many other societies. Since a vast majority of the population is either poor or belongs to middle class, education is believed to be the only tool that can change people's lives dramatically. It is believed to possess the potential to bring about transformation in an individual's and their family's life, usually via a high paying job abroad or a stable 'sarkari naukri' or government job in the country. Education in premier institutes like IITs, IIMs, AIIMS etc. is believed to open the door not just to success but also to a different lifestyle and an altered fortune. Matrimonial

advertisements in newspapers that are usually all about brevity and contain only the most pertinent information often contain the name of the institute of education, particularly if it is an IIT. It is also common knowledge that dowry demands can increase if the prospective bride is for an IIT or IIM educated man. It is thus easy to understand why Indian families treat education with as much seriousness as they do.

Having said that, recognizing the importance of education is not synonymous with having adequate opportunities for education. Not being able to make it top Indian institutes has led many students to seek admission abroad. Foreign universities have now become “safety schools “for increasingly stressed Indian students, who complain that one fateful event can make or break a teenager’s future career. As of 2011, Indians formed the second largest foreign student group in the United States, after Chinese students. In total, almost 105,000 Indian students attended American schools in 2009–2010” (Najar, 2011). Though after the implementation of RTE Act school education has become more accessible in India, higher education opportunities still remain out of reach of a significant proportion of the population. It is usually middle- and upper-class families that can afford to invest in higher education for their children, and the most obvious form this investment takes is in the form of taking admission in coaching institutes.

In India, the performance of a student is evaluated through competitive exams. No matter which field people belong to, almost everyone is required to appear for competitive exams to get admissions in universities or for most positions in the public sector. Entry into the hallowed portals of IITs, IIMs, medical colleges and civil services, among others, are via competitive exams only. Final high school examinations and clearing competitive exams are the criteria for admission to most colleges. Furthermore, the scarcity of quality institutions has led to a situation in which incredibly qualified applicants often fail to gain admission in top colleges. In some cases, colleges require scores higher than 99 percent for admission (Shah 2013). “In 2011, the well-regarded IITs had an acceptance rate of less than 2 percent out of an applicant pool of roughly 500,000 who qualified for the entrance exam” (Najar, 2011). Thus, it is not surprising that many parents send their children to coaching institutes for competitive exams (usually for medical entrance exams and IITs) starting from class 6th! In fact, “as many as 83 per cent of India’s high school students

juggle time around school, extra-curricular activities, and classes in coaching centers, according to a 2012 report” (Datta, 2013).

Some parents choose to admit their children, sometimes of 11-12 years of age, in coaching institutes far from their homes, in the hope that the child will benefit from excellent faculty and facilities provided by coaching institutes in big cities. The city of Kota in Rajasthan attracts many such students every year. It has become famous as the coaching capital for higher education in India and every year as many as 1.6 lakh teenagers flock to its institutes to prepare for engineering and medical entrance exams, the two most popular career streams for middle class India. Hyderabad and Delhi are also hailed as coaching hubs and are home to lakhs of young adults preparing for various competitive exams, particularly civil services and management college seats. Coaching institute that students commonly consider for competitive exam preparation are Aakash Institute, TIME and FIITJEE, Narayana, Bansal classes, Allen career institute etc. They focus on exams such as the IIM Common Admission Test, Management Aptitude Test, UPSC, IIT Joint Entrance Examination, as well as international exams such as GMAT, GRE, IELTS and TOEFL.

Acing these exams becomes proof of one’s worth for many. For many, clearing the entrance exam is the one shot they have for turning their dreams into reality. For many, getting into a particular institute or getting a particular job through a competitive exam is not just their goal but their whole family’s aspiration. Considering the woefully low number of jobs or seats available for which such students compete, it is clear that such an enterprise involves a tremendous amount of stress. There are students who prepare for such exams for multiple consecutive years while their families wait and pray for them to finally crack the exam and transform their lives. The constant pressure on students to succeed in competitive exams has also led to increased rates of suicide in some cases. Kota was in news a couple of years ago because of the increasing spate of suicides by students who found its hyper-competitive environment difficult to survive. (Lakshmi, 2016). There are many such suicides every year that come to public attention by students unable to cope with the demands of their families and institutions. Though suicide is an extreme step, there are several other fallouts that students experience almost on a daily basis when they are part of a highly stressful

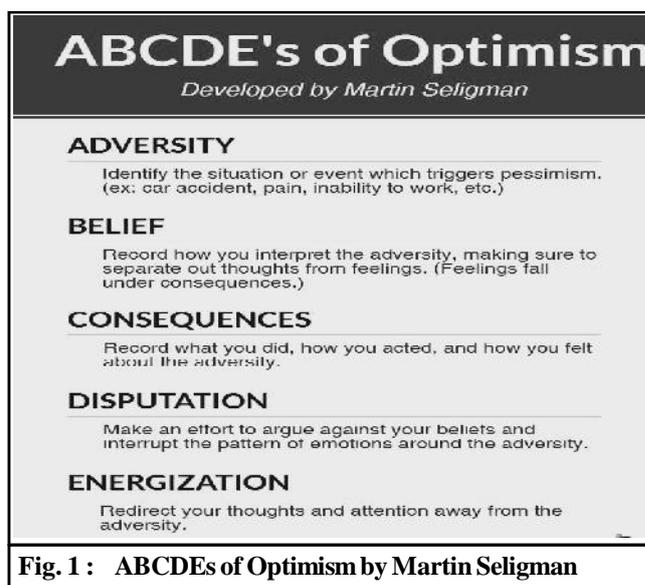
endeavor. Decline in academic performance and negative impact on physical and psychological well-being are the most common outcomes.

In a country like India, it has almost become imperative that the students prepare for competitive exams either by themselves or by enrolling in a coaching institute. Students are discouraged from pursuing anything other than the courses considered to have lucrative career paths like Engineering and Medicine. Courses in Humanities are considered to be inferior and there is considerable societal and parental pressure to opt for hyper-competitive streams like Engineering and Medicine, and later Civil Services etc. Clearly, there is significant stress in students preparing for the limited seats in courses/professions of their choice. Now various researchers indicate that a learner's optimistic orientation towards life results in the ability to manage difficult academic situations with less subjective stress and with less negative impact on psychological and physical wellness (Ormel *et al.*, 1999). Research has shown that Optimism is correlated with many positive life outcomes which includes coping strategies when confronted with adversities, making it an area of interest for the present study on persons preparing for competitive exams.

The history of the concept of Optimism as part of human nature can be found as far back as the early 17th century with the philosophical writings of Rene Descartes (Day and Maltby, 2003). However, it was not until the latter part of the 20th century that it was treated as a personality trait. Optimism has been defined by anthropologist Lionel Tiger (1979) as "a mood or attitude associated with an expectation about the social or material future one which the evaluator regards as socially desirable, to his [or her] advantage, or for his [or her] pleasure" (p. 18). According to Martin Seligman, founder of Positive Psychology, Optimism is a learned skill that can be taught and practiced. Optimists explain life's events differently than pessimists do. While pessimists take negative things that happen to them personally, optimists find them unlikely to happen again.

Seligman (1991) in his book *Learned Optimism* suggested the ABCDE model (Adversity, Belief, Consequences, Disputation, and Energization) to approach stressful situations in an optimistic way. This has been depicted in Fig. 1. A stands for Adversity which is the activating event that causes us concern. B stands for the beliefs we have (rational or not) about the event that trigger our attitudes, fears and subsequent behaviors.

C stands for consequences; what consequences do those beliefs have for us in terms of what we do and how that changes our options and opportunities. D stands for dispute; change comes when we confront our beliefs with real-world evidence and start to dispute our interpretation and beliefs. E stands for energization; here the new evidence and understanding we have exchanged for the old energizes us to make changes, think differently, do things differently, and change our world. This model helps in building optimism by recognizing and disputing pessimistic thoughts.



Seligman (1991) in his book 'Learned Optimism' explains why optimists bounce back from adverse circumstances while pessimists find themselves losing hope in adverse situations and give up easily. "The manner in which you habitually explain to yourself why events happen" (Seligman, 2007 is what Seligman states as explanatory style.). Explanatory style is one's way of explaining about events that happen to them. The ABCDE model by Seligman helps in changing one's explanatory style from pessimistic to optimistic. The present study is an attempt to find out what helps students preparing for competitive exams keep an optimistic outlook towards life in midst of uncertainty and self-doubt and to help them by using a Positive Psychology intervention- Seligman's ABCDE model.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research design wherein

semi structured interviews with 15 participants between age group of 15-30 years were conducted with the help of an interview schedule constructed by the authors. The participants belonged to three categories: students who have prepared for these exams and achieved success, students who are preparing for competitive exams and have not achieved success, and students who have prepared and have left the preparation because they have switched to some other career option. After interviewing each participant, a trial intervention with the help of the ABCDE model by Martin Seligman was conducted with the objective of teaching the possibility of reviewing events and situations of daily life using this model. All the data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

“Success requires persistence, the ability to not give up in the face of failure. I believe that optimistic explanatory style is the key to persistence” (Seligman, 2006).

The data collected using interviews was analyzed through Thematic Analysis, and five major themes emerged with regards to the lived experience of the participants preparing for competitive exams. The participants talked about challenges faced as well as what helped them cope with the challenges. The themes have been discussed below individually:

Failure rupturing one’s social support system:

Students preparing for highly competitive exams go through great emotional turmoil during the phase of their preparation. As one participant put it, the biggest challenge in front of them should be their competitors but the criticism they receive from their family, friends, teachers, and other close ones can be the most disheartening and challenging aspect of the whole journey. Too much criticism can make them fall flat on the surface before they even begin. It not only distracts them from their goal but it majorly contributes to self-doubt, and the individual drowns himself in the never-ending loop of negativity and self-loathing.

“...when I did not clear my exam and I had been preparing for 2 years that time I nearly faced criticism from everyone, anybody would come and say anything to me” (P5, M22).

“everyone kind of supported me, law being a male dominant profession everyone had their speculations but initially I got support from everyone

but then when you face hardships in your career all the family, relatives they start questioning your capabilities and even if you thought you could get up and fight those challenges you won’t be able to because there’s already too much of negativity” (P12, F22)

Dealing with criticism: Different approaches:

Every participant disclosed having dealt with criticism during the course of their preparation but how they handled that criticism noticeably varied. Some participants had a positive interpretation of the criticism which further pushed them to enhance themselves and do better in the areas where they were lacking behind.

“whenever my relatives used to pin point my failure I made sure that I put my 200% in that particular area and improve my performance and give them blow back in their face” (P12, M24).

Criticism has the potential to weaken one’s resolve but when one acknowledges the criticism and works upon it, it may end up proving non-detrimental, and rather, helpful in a way.

Vulnerabilities encountered along the way:

A vast majority of the participants listed health issues as one of the biggest impediments during their preparation for competitive exams. Both mental health and physical health issues came up during the interviews:

“I was diagnosed with vascular headache because of stress and slowly it spread in my whole body, I was on medication and because of the steroids present in them I used to sleep the whole day and I did not study enough.”(P5, F22)

“I went into depression. I started thinking about it a lot and then gradually I went more down and down.” (P2, F23)

Participants who faced health issues in their journey mentioned that improper health posed as a stumbling block in their preparation and made them recognize the role of healthy mind and body in their lives. A number of them reported feeling helpless and experiencing a lack of control because of how their preparation was affected by their health issues.

“I think the only factor that was not in my control was my health. I had typhoid and malaria which really affected me. Obviously you have mental pressure too but other than this is my health issue that was not in my hand.” (P13, F22).

Not everyone's first choice: Society and education system as major constraints:

A number of participants, while talking about how they had ended up in their present journey, talked about their disenchantment with the country's education system and the pressure they felt to take up what they were presently aiming for. Since higher secondary school itself, most students in India are pushed to look upon lucrative career paths. What they actually want to pursue is mostly not even considered as a serious option. Some participants also expressed that if all the subjects and career paths were equally valued and recognized in our country, they might have opted for something else.

"When I was in 11th standard, I thought of doing fashion designing but as it was not considered a secure career I had to choose commerce stream and go ahead with it" (P3, F21).

"I switched to three fields before I finally settled for UPSC. I had arts stream in 12th standard so that I can go into graphic designing but then again everyone is pursuing and appearing for government services, CA or engineering so I also started preparing for UPSC. Although I have cleared my UPSC mains exams but still I have this dream of doing something in that field too" (P9, M25).

Doing what you can: Recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses:

It was noticed that quite a few participants were pulled down by their weaknesses in a particular area which entailed in lack of confidence in their overall chances for success. However, in some participants remarkable self-awareness was seen. They were able to put their weaknesses/ failures in perspective and were able to remind themselves about their strengths as well. They believed in their own strengths and harnessed them to overcome their weaknesses and refused to be let down by them.

"...if I have to overcome my weaknesses, I have to know my own strength. I have to know how to utilize it and I need to be better than yesterday" (P12, F22).

"If I find something tricky and I feel demotivated, I remind myself that there are other subject in which I am good in" (P13, M24).

Consistence and Persistence: Vital ingredients to success:

To plan thoroughly, to have achievable goals and to

work persistently towards achieving those goals has proven to be beneficial for a lot of the participants. Out of all the participants interviewed, those who actually achieved their goals and are no longer preparing for any competitive exams, attributed their success mostly to the component of consistency and persistence which pushed them forward in their pursuit of dreams.

"I failed once, twice but that never pulled me down, my persistence became my best friend which made me succeed in the end" (P9, M25).

"I prepared for 4 years which was not an easy journey but hard work always pays off and knowledge never fails you" (P5, F22).

Parental influence and guidance:

A number of participants highlighted the importance of parental support in their journey. It not only motivated them to do better but also helped them to overcome their failures. The participants revealed that when they felt supported and loved by their parents, they had more confidence in their own abilities to conquer their fears which led to positive results. Parental support also helped the participants maintain an optimistic attitude towards life in general.

"whenever I was low I used to talk to my dad, so every time I used to have a doubt that do I have that potential to deal with this, I always used to seek refuge in my dad and he made me believe in myself and his faith in me made me believe in myself" (P11, F23).

"motivating factor was my father who is a very positive person in my life, more positive than anyone I have seen till now. he always said that medical entrance is not more important than your life, I want you alive and it's not important to be a doctor at the cost of your life" (P5, F22).

Those participants who did not receive enough support from their parents found themselves more in stress and craved their support.

"I always thought I am a good student, I mean I am good in studies but it would have been better if my parents would have supported me, there is less emotional support now" (P2, F22).

To thrive, and not just survive:

Mental health plays a significant role in every individual's life. It is as important as physical health and deserves the same quality of support and attention. In

this study, most participants acknowledged the importance of mental health.

“it is very important you need time for yourself you need to love yourself, 2-3 days break once in every 2 months is very crucial and again when you get back to study you feel refreshed” (P1,F22)

Most of the participants felt that they were not provided with any guidance about mental health. And they understand how important the issue of mental health is, especially in today’s time, where everyone is so much engrossed and consumed in the humdrum of daily life. They expressed desire to learn about how to balance their aspirations with their mental health.

As is evident, a number of concerns were expressed by the participants regarding their journey of preparing for competitive exams. Some of those concerns lie within the circle of influence and some outside for these participants. For e.g. whereas one may not personally be able to do anything about the country’s education system or society’s pressure to choose a certain path or people making discouraging comments upon their lack of success in competitive exams, yet there is still much that is within one’s control. How to deal with the criticism that inevitably follows one’s failures, how to take care of one’s health better, how to enhance one’s well-being and how to deal with lack of support from the important people in our lives without giving in to self-doubt, are some areas where an individual does have considerable influence. Having identified these issues, the next step was to deliver on our promise to the participants to help them do something about the challenges they were facing. For this purpose, with every participant, a trial intervention was conducted in which participants were taught and made to practice a simple exercise inspired by the Positive Psychology tradition of looking inwards in order to solve life’s problems. This exercise was the ABCDE model given by Positive Psychology’s pioneer researcher and practitioner (Martin Seligman, 1991).

Trial Intervention: Demonstrating The ABCDE model:

“Pessimistic labels lead to passivity, whereas optimistic ones lead to attempts to change” (Seligman, 2011).

Seligman, in 1968, came up with the concept of ‘learned helplessness’. Seligman, along with Steve Maier and Bruce Overmier, was studying dogs and discovered that the dogs who experienced painful electric shocks

that they had no control over for a long time, eventually stopped trying to escape. They made no attempts to escape even when the situation changed. They obediently accepted the shocks. But, it was later found out that not all dogs became helpless. One in three never gave up, no matter what the researchers did, which means only two out of them experienced learned helplessness when they were confronted with a situation they had no control over. The difference between the one out of the three that didn’t experience learned helplessness and the two out of that three that did turn out to be something called Explanatory style (Jane, n.d.).

Explanatory style is a person’s way of explaining about events that happen to them. “Your explanatory style stems directly from your way of your place in the world—whether you think you are valuable and deserving or worthless and helpless.” (Seligman, 1990). There are 3 dimensions in one’s explanatory style- Permanence (is about time): temporary vs permanent; Pervasiveness (is about space): specific vs universal; and Personalisation: internal vs external. By identifying one’s Explanatory style, one can see if it is more pessimistic or optimistic. The ABCDE model adapted by Martin Seligman from Albert Ellis’s ABC model helps in changing a person’s explanatory style from pessimism to optimism. (Jane, n.d.)

ADVERSITY=>BELIEF=> CONSEQUENCES
=>DISPUTATION=> ENERGISATION

People tend to blame ‘A’ for ‘C’, however it is actually ‘B’ that make us feel the way we do. Once we see this, we are more likely to dispute our perception and disputing our beliefs can help us to see a situation in a new light and change the way one feels.

The ABCDE model was discussed with each participant and they were taught how to use it in their daily lives. It took a bit of time for them to familiarize themselves with it but eventually they were able to learn to quickly relate the model with their life situations. They were encouraged to apply it to multiple situations for practice, and were asked to put one such situation in writing in accordance with the ABCDE model. Below is a sample of the ABCDE model filled by one of the participants.

ADVERSITY- “I gave an exam and I couldn’t meet the cut-off of the exam”

BELIEF- “I have become lazy, indiscipline and so unfocused. I am not serious about future and career. I was such a hardworking student but after coming to Delhi

all my qualities have deteriorated. I can't even compete and maybe I am not capable enough to give such exams"

CONSEQUENCES-"I felt depressed. Demotivated and felt like I couldn't do anything in life. If I can't even pass such an easy exam. I began comparing myself and started underestimating myself, my abilities and capabilities".

DISPUTATION-"I have been good in past, so I can be better in future. Maybe God has planned something better for me, that's why I couldn't clear the exam. This is like an opportunity to showcase my talent and prove myself again".

ENERGISATION-"I will be more focused and plan my strategy better the next time. It is a lesson for me to not repeat the same mistake which I have done in the past. And every day I will remind myself about my goals and become even more consistent"

This simple exercise shows that though many things may be outside their control, like number of seats up for competition and pressure from family, the participants can certainly still do something to stay focused on their dream and to get there without being too overwhelmed by the challenges on the way. Optimism is only one way such students can be helped; Positive Psychology has a plethora of activities and strategies to enhance other key emotional skills to improve one's chances of doing well in stressful environments, be it in academics or any other sphere of life. As far as academics is concerned, with initiatives like the 'happiness curriculum' now being a reality in many Delhi schools, India is certainly waking up to the need of socio-emotional learning in schools. We propose that similar programs are needed at higher levels too, particularly in the stressful arena of coaching institutes where students prepare for entrance exams, competing for a small number of seats, often with the aim of transforming their family's lives. In the interviews with participants, one recurring theme was lack of knowledge on how to take care of mental health as well as facing adverse health issues due to stress. This is disheartening; one can't be expected to perform at one's best in such a scenario. We as psychologists/educators/parents need to do better for the young lives undergoing this incredibly stressful experience. Though macro-level changes like increasing seats may be slow to come, there is much that can be done for the students' well-being with the existing resources and policies.

Conclusion:

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One important aspect of the present study was to utilize a trial intervention from the field of Positive Psychology in order to help the participants deal with distress by turning to Optimism. For this, the intervention of choice was the ABCDE model developed by Seligman (1991). This intervention proved to be easy to teach and was appreciated by the participants as well. This has implications for the field of education and all stakeholders involved in students' preparation for competitive exams. Through this paper the authors wish to make a call for incorporating such exercises in curriculums of students in high stress environments: there's already a provision for classes on interview preparation and personality development for students in coaching institutes, why not classes on Positive Psychology exercises such as these?

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