

Positive Art Therapy: Envisioning the Intersection of Art Therapy and Positive Psychology

Gioia Chilton and Rebecca A Wilkinson, The George Washington University

ABSTRACT

Art therapists returning from the International Positive Psychology Association's (IPPA) World Congress identified the intersection between art therapy and positive psychology. The following viewpoint considers how positive psychology, the "science of happiness," can enhance the art therapy profession and suggests how art therapy contributes to human "flourishing" – a state in which individuals and communities function with high levels of emotional, psychological, and social well-being. A new term "Positive Art Therapy" explores the interplay between art therapy, positive emotions, positive character, and positive communities. Suggestions are presented to integrate positive art therapy practice, research, and training. It is proposed that by combining the strengths of positive psychology and art therapy, "Positive Art Therapy" can be pivotal in increasing human flourishing.

Authors' Note: The authors would like to acknowledge Rachel Schriebman, BA; Tarquam McKenna, PhD, AthR; Poppy Scheibel, ATR-BC; and the students in the 2008 Positive Psychology and Art Therapy course held at the George Washington University Graduate Art Therapy Program, Washington, DC, for contributing to the development of this paper. We are especially grateful to Lani Gerity, ATR-BC, whose online course, "The Artist's Happiness Challenge" directed the authors to the field of Positive Psychology. Gioia Chilton, MA, ATR-BC can be contacted at giofo@aol.com and Rebecca A. Wilkinson, MA, ATR-BC, can be contacted at raw1717@yahoo.com.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, art therapists who attended the First World Congress on Positive Psychology in Philadelphia, PA, USA in June of 2009 learned that art therapy has much to offer and much to gain from cross-fertilization with the emerging field of positive psychology. The following viewpoint explores this intersection. It asks how art therapists will contribute to 'human flourishing' – a state in which individuals and communities experience high levels of emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Keyes, 2002) and how positive psychology can positively influence and enhance the field of art therapy.

WHAT IS POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY?

Positive psychology, the science of happiness, is the study of positive emotions, positive character, and the positive institutions and communities that facilitate their development. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), in their seminal article *Positive Psychology: An introduction*, maintained that the prevailing model of psychology, with its focus on illness and symptoms, does not reflect a balanced view of human potential. They noted that, although the study of mental illness has successfully led to the identification, classification, and treatment of many disorders, it has neglected to account for what has