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.

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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