

**Empowering Coping Skills through Positive Psychology: An Intervention Study in Higher  
Education**

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### **Abstract**

Coping styles have a dominant influence in the efforts to reduce the effects of stress while also improving the well-being of humans. However, there is a severe lack of evidence on the positive aspects of coping and positive emotions, especially for post-secondary students. The Broaden-and-build theory explains that a positive mindset for humans can allow room for new opportunities and perspectives in life, establishing growth habits that extend beyond the repertoire of comfortable and habitual ideas and actions. Based on this theory, the current mixed factorial pretest-posttest true experimental design aims to explore the development of coping and overall well-being, the dependent variables of the study, by comparing the difference of a positive psychological intervention. 1,000 participants will be sampled at the freshman orientation at UC Santa Barbara, then, the students will be randomly assigned to one of two levels for an entire academic school year. In the independent variable, the experimental level will be whether the student is enrolled in the positive psychology course whereas the control group will only partake in the respective questionnaires at the pretest and posttest periods. The study hypothesizes that the students enrolled in the positive psychology intervention will yield more positive coping mechanisms as well as greater scores of life satisfaction compared to the students who will not be partaking in the course curriculum. Threats to both internal and external validity could potentially arise as a consequence of the self-reported questionnaires given out in a computer lab with the researchers and the sample for strictly only freshman college students.

## **Empowering Coping Skills through Positive Psychology: An Intervention Study in Higher Education**

It is widely known that undergraduate university students are a population commonly vulnerable to pressure being exposed to a multitude of stressors, for example, academic, personal, social, financial, and familial. This begs the question, how do they manage to cope with life as a college student? Positive psychology is a field that emphasizes character strengths and behaviors that grant individuals the ability to build a life of purpose and meaning to thrive in life instead of just surviving. In response to the declining social indicators in many socially and economically developed countries, this new branch of psychology emerged with the increasing wealth of states and their citizens disproportionate to life satisfaction (Pluskota, 2014). Positive psychology provides a theoretical basis in addition to practical solutions to encourage others to want to better their mental well-being and physical health (Pluskota, 2014). Coping has been defined as the cognitive and behavioral attempts someone employs in order to manage stress conceptualized as a process rather than an individual trait (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 as cited in Garcia, 2010). The increasing focus on adolescent coping specifically is partly due to the expanding awareness of the factors that pose risks as well as protection allowing intervention strategies aimed at enriching the well-being of adolescents (Garcia, 2010). So, if there is room for improvement in adolescents' coping skills, it is attainable for them to view and respond to stressors differently resulting in a more positive overall well-being. In the proposed study, a positive psychology intervention will be incorporated in an effort to observe the effects on the development of coping skills and overall well-being in higher education students.

The current experiment will be built upon the theoretical foundation of Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory outlining the structure and purpose of a particular set of positive

emotions, such as joy, interest, contentment, and love (Fredrickson, 2004). This theory suggests that positive emotions broaden our awareness of the world and empower undiscovered ways of thinking, possibilities, and ideas. With this adapted mindset, it encourages people to build personal resources like resilience, social connections, and skills that can be served for a later time in life. Essentially, positive emotions not only provide a temporary good feeling but also aid in the growth and development of people by broadening their perspectives and building their inner strengths. A key component in a plethora of theorists' models of emotions is the notion that emotions are associated with specific action tendencies (Frijda 1986; Frijda et al. 1989; Tooby & Cosmides 1990; Lazarus 1991; Levenson 1994; Oatley & Jenkins 1996 as cited in Fredrickson, 2004) highlighting that both positive and negative emotions play an important role in overall well-being and the specific type of coping mechanisms that develop into habits. Coping accounts for more than just having control over one's negative emotions during a challenging situation or in times of stress; it involves acknowledging that the simultaneous presence of both positive and negative emotions hold key implications for coping strategies so that they can be transformed into positive coping (Góngora-Coronado & Vásquez-Velázquez, 2018). Overall, the collateral of positive emotions is an increase in the available information that people can employ to cope with stress as portrayed in previous research that tested positive psychology interventions in an educational environment (Pluskota, 2014).

In the past, evidence has shown that the effects of the learning as well as the teaching process hold a level of power on the type of coping strategy that university students practice (de la Fuente et al., 2020). This goes to show that there are many factors that can contribute to the changes in coping strategies over time, especially for university students, so it is important to educate them on healthy life practices to help them foster positive coping that can become a part

of them even after graduating from postsecondary education. In a systematic review article, some of the studies conducted additional follow-up testing periods after the pretest and posttest time points finding that the participants in the positive psychology intervention continued to show greater life satisfaction in comparison to the control group (Hobbs et al., 2022). Although only half of the studies used control groups and none used random assignment, the changes in the overall well-being of university students were still statistically significant. (Hobbs et al., 2022) Another trait of the positive psychology classes that will also be implemented into the current study is that most interventions honed in on character strengths and gratitude. (Hobbs et al., 2022). Examining the effects of coping with specific demographic variables also yielded consistent results with adaptive coping reducing the effects of stress and boosting well-being (Monroy et al., 2021). Moreover, the testing of positive psychological interventions is still new to psychology researchers, establishing an urgency for replication and pilot studies such as the testing of mindfulness as an intervention tailored for an educational environment that found significant results for levels of perceived stress, anxiety, depression, and personally relevant changes with a corresponding increase in mindfulness (Lynch et al., 2011).

The rationale for the current study lies in the fact that a majority of historical psychological studies have severely lacked the investigation of positive emotions in comparison to negative emotions (Fredrickson, 2004). The proposed experiment addresses a gap in the literature clarifying the differences in coping to elucidate why some individuals are better than others when in the face of stress or other conflicts in their lives (Góngora-Coronado & Vásquez-Velázquez, 2018).

It can be hypothesized that college students enrolled in a positive psychology course emphasizing student well-being will demonstrate significantly greater development of positive

coping mechanisms throughout their undergraduate education compared to those students who will not be enrolled in the course. This difference in self-reported changes in coping techniques is expected to also be seen in the relationship between satisfaction with life scores between the students in the positive psychology class and those who are not.

## **Methods**

### **Design**

In accordance with other studies that center on positive psychology interventions, the current study design will entail a 2 (time of testing: pre-test, post-test) x 2 (control: not enrolled in the positive psychology course versus manipulated: enrolled in the positive psychology course) mixed factorial pretest-posttest true experimental design. The first independent variable, a course in the scientific study of human well-being, will have two levels: undergraduate students in the positive psychology course and a no-treatment control condition where students will not be enrolled in the course. This specific feature will expand on a previous study that tested whether participation in a positive psychology course influences undergraduates' well-being over a 14-week semester period (Maybury, 2012) by including a true control group. The dependent variables will be the students' well-being and coping mechanisms in both levels, operationalized through the improvements in overall well-being and the changes in the type of coping styles of the subjects from their pretest baseline (beginning of the first year of college) to their posttest (end of the first year of college).

### **Participants**

The participants in this study will be recruited from UC Santa Barbara during the orientation for all first-year students that is hosted prior to the beginning of the academic year. First-year undergraduate students will be the subjects of the study since they have been seen to

show lower levels of self-efficacy due to their lack of academic experience (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016 as cited in Freire et al., 2020). Self-efficacy beliefs significantly impact student behavior, serving as a strong force that influences their engagement, dedication, perseverance, self-control, and academic performance (Schunk and Pajares, 2010; Honicke and Broadbent, 2016; Ritchie, 2016; Zumbrunn et al., 2019 as cited in Freire et al., 2020), so implementing the study at this specific time in their educational endeavor could leave a lasting impression that can be carried throughout the remainder of their undergraduate education and beyond. Participants will be sampled from the students who choose to sign up using simple random sampling to strengthen the external validity of the study. Once participants are selected, they will be notified via Canvas, the online academic portal for all affiliated UC Santa Barbara students and staff, that they were selected to take part. I will use 1,000 participants in the study establishing a larger sample size than previously used to allow greater opportunity for significant results (Maybury, 2012). There will be no specific demographic that the study will focus on since all students have their own respective coping styles and state of overall well-being. To better understand the effects of the positive psychology course, the study will include participants from all races, ethnicities, and majors compared to previous research (Maybury, 2012), while the only inclusion criteria will be to identify as a first-year undergraduate at UC Santa Barbara at the time of the study.

## **Measures**

The evolution of coping styles is operationalized using the Academic Stress Questionnaire which has been previously utilized to measure the types of coping strategies used by the participants (Cabanach et al., 2010 as cited in Freire et al., 2020). The self-reported questionnaire has 23 items in which it gauges three approach strategies for coping: positive

reappraisal, support seeking, and planning. Positive reappraisal is an indirect control strategy where the student readjusts the conflict by highlighting the positive, it is prompted as “When I am faced with a problematic situation, I forget unpleasant aspects and highlight the positive ones.” This psychometric feature was found to be acceptable in terms of both reliability (construct validity = 0.857) and validity (convergent validity = 0.483) (Freire et al., 2020). Next, support seeking is a mixed coping strategy in which one has the aim to seek information as well as advice from others to face the current situation seen in the questionnaire as “When I am faced with a problematic situation, I ask for advice from a family member or a close friend” or they can inquire comfort and emotional relief seen as “When I am faced with a problematic situation, I manifest my feelings and opinions to others.” The psychometric features of this subscale were good in reliability (construct reliability = 0.900) and validity (convergent validity = 0.566) (Freire et al., 2020). Lastly, planning is a primary control strategy defined by the analysis and outline of a plan of action to resolve the conflict (“When I am faced with a problematic situation, I draw up an action plan and follow it”). This last psychometric feature was also shown to be acceptable in reliability (construct reliability = 0.85) and validity (convergent validity = 0.504) (Freire et al., 2020). The responses for all three coping strategies are recorded on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). The overall well-being of the first-year students is operationally defined by a life satisfaction questionnaire. As exemplified by Maybury (2012), Diener, Emmons, Larson, and Griffin’s (1985) Satisfaction with Life Scale is a 5-item measure using a 7-point response scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) with a strong internal validity score of 0.86. An example from this measure is, “In most ways, my life is close to ideal.” Lastly, the characteristics of the positive psychology course are imitated as done in the previous study from Maybury (2012) with the same in-class and out-of class assignments and

class exercises throughout the entire school year (see Materials for additional tasks). One of the characteristics is the Values in Action assessment (VIA) where students evaluate their personal character strengths (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004 as cited in Maybury, 2012) via an online questionnaire. This questionnaire measures the students' strengths on 24 characteristics (zest, bravery, and appreciation of beauty) taking about 25 minutes to complete the 240 items that are rated on a 1 (*not strong*) to 5 (*strong*) Likert-style rating scale.

## **Materials**

The current study operates computers for students in both levels to complete the Academic Stress Questionnaire previously mentioned (Maybury, 2012) during the pretest and posttest periods. Students in the manipulated level, being enrolled in the positive psychology course, also are given a beauty and gratitude journal, use paper to write gratitude letters, and watch two films (*Shawshank Redemption* and *Best in Show*) throughout their time in the course. There are also four books that participants read throughout the time of class: *Learned Optimism* (Seligman, 2006 as cited in Maybury, 2012), *The year of living biblically: One man's humble quest to follow the Bible as literally as possible* (Jacobs, 2007 as cited in Maybury, 2012), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (Hosseini, 2007 as cited in Maybury, 2012), and *Olive Kitteridge* (Strout, 2008 as cited in Maybury, 2012).

## **Procedure**

All study participants chosen will be emailed the informed consent form via Canvas a week before the first day of instruction with a calendar to schedule when they will come into the lab to complete the pretest questionnaires. After finalizing their consent to be included in the study, the students will be randomly assigned to either the manipulated level of the independent variable: the positive psychology course, or the control level: not being enrolled in the course but

will still be included in the questionnaires at the respective times of testing. All subjects will come into the lab to complete the Academic Stress Questionnaire and Satisfaction with Life Scale at the time they had previously scheduled their appointment at the beginning of the year which is also a time of the least amount of academic stress for the first-year students (Freire et al., 2020). Throughout the school year, students in the positive psychology course will complete the assigned in-class and out-of class exercises (Maybury, 2012). After completing the VIA assessment, students will choose two characteristics that they want to strengthen with exercises (Peterson & Seligman, 2004 as cited in Maybury, 2012) and then will write a paper about the efficacy of the exercises. Every day of the study, each student will record five events or observations that they view as beautiful or grateful for, such as “getting a text from my father, saying he loves me.” Next, participants will write a thank you note to someone they feel they have not shown their appreciation for enough, read the note out loud to the recipient, and then will write a paper about the experience. Additionally, students will watch the two films mentioned above and will analyze the movie characters’ behavior in terms of character strengths. The subjects will also read four books in which they will analyze in line with the course material presented. Through the readings, lectures, social scientific research, and multimedia presentations, participants will take into consideration both fictional and real epitomes of character strengths (Maybury, 2012). A few weeks before the end of the year, another email will be sent via Canvas with the same scheduling process so participants can plan accordingly when to come back to the lab for the posttest questionnaires without interfering with their final exams. The students will then be debriefed on the purpose of the study and thanked for their time and participation.

### **Threats to Validity**

Even though previous research has shown that positive psychology interventions have been shown to potentially increase well-being among the participants, there is no such thing as a perfect study. The established study is a true experiment by implementing random assignment for the levels of the independent variable. However, there is a possibility that causal claims cannot be made considering the setting in which participants responded to the self-reported questionnaires. The proposed study will request the students to come in person at the computer lab at UC Santa Barbara to minimize any technological or external distractions, but this allows room for respondents to have a bias in their answers about whether to intentionally harm the results of the data or choose the answers that they feel might best benefit the data. Additionally, there is also the possibility of external validity being threatened as a result of the chosen sample for the experiment. The study will inspect the differences in coping styles and overall well-being in first-year university students, therefore severely restricting the applicability from the general population since all humans undergo stressful experiences. Furthermore, only freshman college students will be accepted into the sample, limiting the generalizability even more for all students in their postsecondary journey.

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