



The Upward Spirals Wellbeing Programme:

Strengthening Schools

Proposal for staff, pupil and parents
enrichment courses

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Upward Spirals: Strengthening Schools

Teachers as a profession are suffering from soaring levels of work-related stress and burnout, blaming heavy workload, accountability pressures, curriculum and qualification reform and mixed messages from government. According to *The Guardian* survey (2016) of teachers working in state schools in England:

- 98% feel under increasing pressure at work
- 75% claim that the job has adversely affected their mental health and 73% physical health
- 43% plan to leave teaching over the next 4 years

Young people in the UK are also experiencing increasing levels of mental illness, including anxiety, depression, self-harming and suicide, but according to the Association of School and College Leaders, 65% head teachers say they struggle to access mental health services for pupils.

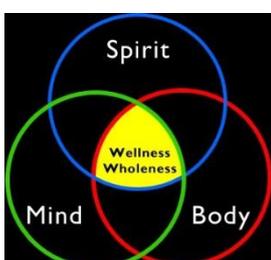
Upward Spirals workshops and courses are intended to support staff, pupils, and parents and to complement existing wellbeing lessons and mental health services.

The **Upward Spirals (US) programme** offers an exciting new approach to creating more positive and flourishing schools for both staff and pupils through workshops and training courses that can be delivered to staff, pupils and parents. The programme combines core aspects of **Positive Psychology** – such as increasing positive emotions, developing a growth mindset in learning and building character strengths - **mindfulness practice** for relaxation and stress management, and current research on **nutrition, exercise and sleep** as the foundations for good health.

Interventions are creative, playful and flexible and will be tailored to the specific needs of staff and clients in the organisation to provide a bespoke holistic training package for your school.

Positive Health *Plus* and the Upward Spirals Wellbeing Programme

Positive Health *Plus* is a private health education practice led by Maggie Bevington who has extensive clinical experience in nursing and holistic medicine and holds an MSc in Applied Positive Psychology (PP). Drawing on the strengths of both conventional and holistic approaches to healthcare and informed by current health research, Maggie advocates an integrative approach to wellbeing that incorporates both physical health and psychological wellbeing, in schools, organisations and community groups. Making sense of confusing and conflicting health advice can



be challenging. US courses encourage individuals to explore *what-works-well* for them rather than a *one-size-fits-all* approach, using PP to create optimal wellbeing, happiness and positive change in individuals and organisations.

‘The Pursuit of Happiness:’

CentreForum Commission Report (CFC; 2014).

Mental health problems are currently the biggest contributor to poor wellbeing in the UK.

The need for action to improve health, wellbeing and happiness across the nation as a whole is recognised in the CFC report, bringing positive psychology into the heart of government health policy in the UK. CFC recommendations begin with an important overarching goal, to:

“First, make the mental wellbeing of the nation or ‘the pursuit of happiness’ a clear and measurable goal of government,” (p.7).

In schools, the CFC report (2014) suggests that:

“The national curriculum should include the requirement to teach children and young people how to look after their mental health and build up emotional resilience through approaches such as mindfulness”... and “there should be increased access to psychological and other therapies in schools or in the community” (p10).

Upward Spirals positive psychology workshops and courses aim to support staff, pupils and parents to create happier, healthier, more flourishing schools.

What is Positive Psychology?

Positive psychology (PP) – commonly called the ‘science of happiness’ – is defined as: *“the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive”* (Seligman, 2011).

Building-what’s-strong-not-fixing-what’s-wrong

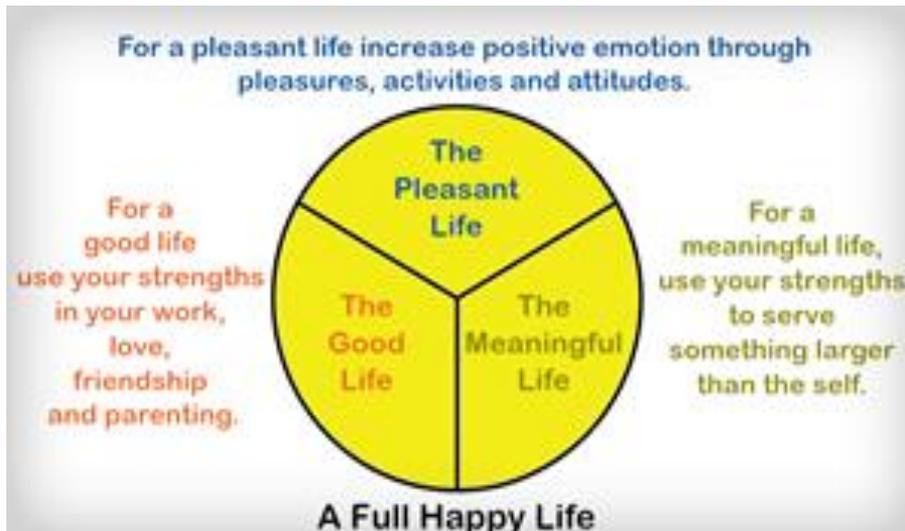
PP is a relatively new area of scientific research that focuses on mental health rather than mental illness,

strengths not weakness and the factors which promote happiness and create optimal functioning.

Positive education incorporates physical and psychological wellbeing and strengths-development as a healthier route to academic success.



Feeling good and functioning well



According to Martin Seligman (*the* founder of PP), a full and happy life consists of 3 parts: **a pleasant life; a good life, and a meaningful life.**

PP works with all of these areas together to create flourishing health and wellbeing.

Research, psychological theories and practical application



Upward Spirals courses draw on elements from ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ scientific knowledge including neuro-science, positive psychology and ‘*psychology as usual*’, offering innovative, practical workshops and courses for staff, students and parents, using evidence-based interventions to support positive change.

Neuroplasticity

Children’s brains are moulded physiologically by their environment into their late twenties. The teenage brain is at a vital stage of development, primed for knowledge with exceptional strengths and abilities, yet highly vulnerable. Anxiety, mood disorders and mental health issues commonly begin in the teen years and can persist right through adult life. Learning positive coping strategies and healthy habits as children supports wellbeing at school and for the future.

Attributional / Explanatory Thinking Style

Ground-breaking research shows that how we perceive stress alters how it affects us: it’s not stress that’s the main problem; it’s also about how we believe it will affect us. Our outlook on life generally also has a major impact on how we deal with stress and difficulty.

A **pessimistic** thinking style (expecting negative future outcomes) is strongly correlated with depression whereas an **optimistic** style (expecting positive future outcomes) leads to consistently better results in many areas of life, including health, happiness and achievement. Pessimists can learn to develop a more optimistic outlook with simple positive psychology tools.



Mindset

Mindset refers to our view of our own abilities and qualities, such as intelligence and creativity: “the view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life,” (p6; Dweck, 2011).

Professor of Psychology Carol Dweck who formulated this concept regularly speaks at education conferences on the importance of understanding mindset in learning and achievement. Not achieving goals or failing is reframed as ‘NOT YET’ (successful). With a ‘fixed’ *mindset* we believe that we are ‘stuck’ with the abilities and qualities such as intelligence or creativity that we are born with. Teaching a ‘growth’ *mindset* shows children that with effort and engagement, they CAN learn and master new skills: that growth and development is possible.

Positive emotions

Positive emotions such as gratitude, hope and optimism, humour and kindness can boost motivation and create a happier, healthier environment for growth and flourishing. Research shows that children who are motivated and want to do well in school achieve considerably better results. Smiling and laughter make you look more successful, popular and attractive to others and feeling good improves overall health as well as helping you to perform better! Whilst happiness does not guarantee success, it is an important factor in life satisfaction and wellbeing for children now and in later life.

Positive emotions not only *undo* negative emotions, they ‘*inoculate you*’ against negative feelings too and are infectious. ‘*Emotional contagion*’ refers to when the mood of those you spend a lot of time with *spreads* to you - whether positive or negative – so happy and fulfilled staff teaching positive emotions to pupils can spread to classes, forms and whole schools.

Building on Strengths

Positive psychology helps to identify and build the personal strengths and skills of individuals and groups within any organisation, including specific strengths that are correlated with greater happiness and success. Identifying ‘*signature strengths*’ (those that come naturally and you enjoy using) can help to boost self-esteem and confidence. Practising strengths-building exercises, increasing positive emotions, learning mindfulness and exploring current thinking in healthier lifestyle choices can support wellbeing, reduce stress, build psychological resilience and enhance the process of development and growth for staff and students at work / school and home.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness described simply is '*being present, or living in the moment.*' When life is busy and we are feeling stressed, it is easy to focus on what needs doing next without really paying attention to what we are doing now, in the present moment. Mindfulness helps us to become more aware of what or who we are engaged with and of our 'selves' and the world around us.

Considerable evidence supports the many benefits of mindfulness and meditation on health including stress reduction, pain relief and greater overall wellbeing. Many people 'have a go' at mindfulness meditation but give up prematurely because they think that they 'can't do it' or don't have the time, but this isn't true! Everyone can learn and as with most new skills it just takes a little patience and practice and schools who embrace mindfulness are noticing the benefits.

Upward Spirals courses explore many ways of applying mindfulness, not only meditation: for example mindful colouring, eating and performing every day activities. Mindfulness training for students can be especially at times of stress such as during exams or inspections but has also been shown to improve behaviour, reduce hyperactivity, improve memory, concentration and increase focus on schoolwork.

NB. Mindfulness can be learned as part of the full programme or as a separate module: as short courses, or over a longer period of time. A minimum of 6-8 regular sessions are normally recommended to embed learning, allow individual practice and provide meaningful evaluation.

The importance of nutrition, exercise and good quality sleep

The current 'epidemic' of obesity and chronic diseases such as type II diabetes (also rising in children), are rarely out of the headlines. Conflicting research and health advice around food and exercise can sometimes be very confusing and contradictory and it can be hard to know what to know what to achieve the best level of health.

The amount and quality of our sleep can also have a major effect on both psychological and physical health, with poor sleep being correlated with mental health problems and weight gain in some individuals. A recent survey reports around a third of people in the UK suffering from sleep problems, making it the most widely reported psychological disorder. Increased use of technological devices - especially amongst 21st century teens - is a major factor in decreased / interrupted sleep (also decreased outdoor play and lack of exposure to natural environments), with 1 in 5 young people reportedly waking to check social media during the night.

US promotes discussion on different healthy lifestyle choices and current thinking to help individuals take responsibility for their own health and find an approach that fits their specific needs and lifestyle rather than a 'one-size-fits-all'. US courses include 'marginal gains theory' (small changes lead to big gains) in thinking, behaviour and habits to provide children the foundations for a healthy, happy life.

Upward Spirals Programme: The Evidence

- Experiencing positive emotions makes you feel good, broadens your attention, increases creativity and playfulness
- Positive emotions can 'undo' negative feelings, enhance resilience and trigger 'upward spirals' in growth and development
- Happier people function better at work, are more motivated, more productive and recover more quickly from illness
- Mindfulness is strongly correlated with wellbeing: it calms the body, reduces stress and anxiety, supports positive thinking and improves psychological wellbeing
- There is considerable evidence that regular exercise, a healthy diet and good quality sleep are associated with improved mental wellbeing and reduced incidence of depression.

Proposed Workshop and Course Structure and Fees

US aims to build on current knowledge and practice – not teach what you already know and do well – introducing new ideas, stimulating discussion and facilitating positive change in individuals and organisations. I hope to work collaboratively with current educational and psychological services to build an enhanced service provision.

- Workshops and courses would be held on school premises subject to availability of suitable room space
- Sessions are ideally during office hours although evening, Saturday or residential workshops may be possible by prior arrangement, according to course requirement
- Charges vary according to length and regularity of workshop / course and numbers of participants: a guide would be £100 for a 1-hour session; £200 for a half day (up to 3 hours workshop including break) and £350 for a full day workshop (up to 6 hours including breaks).

- Supportive resources and handouts will be provided by email for printing as required to keep costs low.
- Smaller groups are preferred to facilitate meaningful discussion, interaction and participation: classroom support is required for groups of more than 12 students.
- For regular sessions where time availability is short (for example daily or weekly mindfulness practice, perhaps before examinations), short pre-school / lunchtime / after school sessions can also be arranged.
- Some workshops (for example strengths building) or courses held over a few weeks may require participants to complete short interventions between sessions. Internet access will be required to show video clips and to take an online 'strengths survey' in school, or can be completed externally as a pre-course requirement or 'homeplay'.

So how will your school know if the Upward Spirals programme has worked?

A combination of pupils self-reported feedback and validated measures (according to course selected), will be completed at the beginning and end of all courses and a brief report of findings issued to the school representative within one month of completion. Interim reports are available on request for longer-term programmes.

Conclusion

Upward Spirals offer unique, innovative and truly holistic training package that could contribute to a more positive School environment for staff, students and parents. The core programme of the strengths-building approach of positive psychology, mindfulness practice and encouraging healthy habits, will be adapted to fit the specific and individual needs of your school to provide a bespoke training package.

The programme is designed to complement and enhance the current PHSE curriculum and support the valuable work of conventional mental health services. This approach is in-line with current government health policy and would put your school at the forefront of the journey towards health, wellbeing and happiness in schools.

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