Looking at the brighter side

“We need to increase wellbeing, not just decrease mental illness.”

Dr Lindsay Oades

Anxiety, depression and drug dependence are common in the Illawarra, as throughout Australia. Perhaps less recognised is the fact that high levels of wellbeing and happiness are even more common. In fact, Australia experiences some of the highest levels of wellbeing in the world, recently being ranked the No 2 nation in the ‘human development index’.

An emerging discipline called ‘positive psychology’ is questioning the scientific focus of professions such as psychology, psychiatry and nursing being directed so predominantly at illness, rather than wellness.

While recent Australian initiatives such as ‘Beyond Blue’ and early intervention to prevent psychosis are highly commendable, they are only half the story. These are referred to as mental health initiatives, yet when you unpack them they are actually about illness, symptoms and distress.

At the University of Wollongong, a research program based on positive psychology is investigating the benefits of approaches that take strengths, goals, optimism and wellbeing as their starting point - rather than deficits, symptoms, depression and distress.

People often think of ‘happiness’ as a nice effect of an enjoyable moment. The evidence, however, is that it goes much deeper. People who are happy live longer, have better relationships, perform better at work, earn more and develop less physical illnesses - and do so over their whole lifetime.

More is being discovered about what it is that makes people happier and enables them to experience wellbeing. It is clear that having strong social relationships, living in line with your values, working towards personally chosen goals, regular exercise, being grateful and optimistic all increase happiness - which in turn can lead to the other benefits. And yes, money makes little difference once you have enough to meet your basic needs.

Increasing wellbeing also makes individuals, institutions and communities more resilient in the tough times. The community as a whole would benefit if the goal was to improve wellbeing, rather than simply reduce mental illness. It is a concern that many new health graduates around the world will leave their courses knowing very little about helping people to increase wellbeing – how to work with strengths, clarify values, build effective relationships and set personal goals.

Fortunately, in the Illawarra, these approaches are now being included in the health curriculum at the University of Wollongong and investigated within the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute (IHMRI). A good example is the ‘collaborative recovery model’, designed to help people with enduring mental illness. This model – developed in the Illawarra and receiving international acclaim – shifts the traditional focus of managing illness and its symptoms to a more positive focus on personal choice, goals and wellbeing… the very things that patients say they want.

Using this model, a person with schizophrenia may work with a health practitioner to establish their personal values and strengths, and doing so increases their motivation. At the right time personal goals are set and the person, sometimes with the assistance of their family, works on agreed tasks to achieve these goals. Medication is important in as much as it may help the person achieve their goals - but reducing symptoms is not the be-all and end-all.

Ask yourself, what is life about? For most, the answer will be working towards more of the good things like being with loved ones, rather than not having hayfever... or other symptoms or illnesses. Of course illness exists, but so does wellbeing. We need to develop a science of why life is worth living, as well as a science of treating mental illness.

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