

## POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY PROJECT

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**Introduction.** The Positive Psychology course was extremely valuable in introducing me to Martin Seligman's PERMA model, which identifies the factors that help individuals to achieve a deeper sense of happiness and well-being. Seligman has identified elements within an environment that provide the opportunity for success and the ability to flourish. These elements are grouped under the term "PERMA" - Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. Seligman's theory of well-being that we studied in the course can be applied to any person in any particular area of their life. In particular, as a coach in the Scarsdale Schools District, I am interested in its application to sports and athletics and how the PERMA model may enhance traditional coaching approaches that focus around psychological improvement and performance enhancement. Below are some of my reflections on each section of the PERMA model and how they may be applied to athletics at the high school level.

**Positive Emotions.** Participating in sports (and team sports in particular) can be a source of different positive emotions. For example, the joy of winning a game or championship together or achieving a task or goal together can be a great source of joy and gratitude for individuals. Positive emotions can be vitally important in helping players to increase their awareness and problem-solving ability when they are in a game or practice. They can also help to support players through negative or difficult experiences. Participating in athletics can also be a great way to improve one's overall health (both physically and psychologically) by being active, being in relationships with others and working at improving a particular set of skills.

Some tangible practices that could help to foster more positive emotions during practices and games could include:

- (1) Exercises where athletes recount what went well in particular situations.
- (2) Gratitude rituals before/during/after games or practices.
- (3) Recounting memorable or funny moments.
- (4) Performing random acts of kindness for teammates.
- (5) Exercises that involve smiling/laughing.
- (6) Disputing negative thinking.
- (7) Savoring activities during practices or games.
- (8) Fostering good conversations between key constituents - parents, coaching staff, athletes, athletic administration.
- (9) Reflection Questions: What is the feeling players get at a practice or a game? What are some actions coaches can take to create positive emotion within the sporting environment?

**Engagement.** Engagement in sports can be seen in the time athletes spend in developing their strengths and fixing their weaknesses. Participating in sports also

requires mental toughness, dedication and concentration, which is another example of the type of engagement shown by athletes. One key goal to get athletes fully engaged in their sports is to get them to reach a state of flow in practice or when competing in a game. Flow is typically experienced in structured activities at which the level of difficulty or challenge can be achieved but varied. Sports games are ideal for this kind of scenario, especially for students who have difficulty getting to this state when doing school work.

Some tangible practices that could help to foster more engagement during practices and games could include:

- (1) Teaching athletes mindfulness to help them be present and focus on things that immediately affect their performance (thus increasing their engagement).
- (2) Breathing, meditating and visualizing practices.
- (3) Teaching flow theory - balancing goals and abilities and working towards them in training.
- (4) Giving athletes ownership of the process in practices and games.
- (5) Reflection Question: How does the coach plan and direct a purposeful practice that challenges the athlete/team but lets the athlete/team develop?

**Relationships.** The types of interactions that individuals have in their social environment play a large role in how they perceive themselves. Individuals who are able to form and maintain strong relationships are happier than their counterparts who do not have this skill over the long run. In team sports, relationships are vital to the success of the team. Feelings of collaboration and mutual support can have a positive effect on individual performances in a team. Team spirit and a sense of togetherness can also go a long way towards teams having successful seasons together.

Some tangible practices that could help to foster better relationships during practices and games could include:

- (1) Constructive and caring coaching (verbally and by action).
- (2) Support, respect, praise and open communication.
- (3) Random acts of kindness between teammates and coaching staff.
- (4) Team building events.
- (5) Social events.
- (6) Team rituals.
- (7) Reflection Question: What are the key relationships that need to be fostered to ensure the team's success?

**Meaning.** Engaging in athletics can be a meaningful exercise and can contribute strongly to well-being. There are a variety of ways in which athletics can function in this capacity. For some individuals, it can help to relax; for others it can help to stay healthy and in shape; for others, it can be a source of building relationships and can give them an outlet for socialization. Athletics also gives a way for individuals to work on their strengths. Improving in these areas can be a source of positive emotions and can help individuals feel more happy in being more successful at life skills. Getting to use one's best qualities often leads to emotions of joy and excitement and helps to give a sense of meaning.

Some tangible practices that could help to foster more meaning during practices and games could include:

- (1) Identification and celebration of individual and team shared strengths.
- (2) Practices that provide players with more autonomy and ownership.
- (3) Reflection Question: What makes for a successful practice, game, season?

**Accomplishment.** Sports is an obvious place in which a sense of accomplishment can arise. Teaching athletes to set goals and achieve them is an important aspect of coaching. In general, the achievements of small goals rather than long-term pursuits tends to be more successful. This is because these shorter-term goals tend to be more tangible and achievable, particularly for younger players. One important aspect of accomplishment that I emphasize a lot in my coaching is to shift the mindset from outcome to process. This mentality is the ability to stay focused on the journey without getting caught up with the final result. This is a key concept that the younger players need to get under their belt. Their main goal should be their development into a varsity player, and not necessarily the immediate results. “When you’re committed to the process, you always win because you’re improving daily. You are constantly moving towards what you want because of the small, consistent actions you’re taking” - B. Cain. A practical coaching strategy I would like to implement is emphasizing the importance of what we can control. Teaching athletes to differentiate between what they can and cannot control is vital. One way to do this is to make a list of all the things that are non-controllable - officials, fans, media, the other team, playing time, field conditions, scheduling, etc, as well as the things which we can control - attitude, body language, self-talk, present-moment focus, process, preparation, etc. Helping athletes differentiate this knowledge clearly in their minds will help them to focus on the process rather than the outcome.

Some tangible practices that could help to foster a sense of accomplishment during practices and games could include:

- (1) Training in positive goal setting (individual/team; long-term/short-term).
- (2) Rewarding and celebrating progress.
- (3) Setting clear and reasonable accomplishments.
- (4) Providing positive feedback, praise and support.
- (5) Reflection Question: How do we celebrate and highlight both individuals and the team?

**Conclusion.** In closing, perhaps the biggest take away for me on the PERMA model is the idea that the teacher/leader is the key person to help promote this type of thinking. As discussed in class, it has been shown that if the teacher embodies the ideals of the PERMA model (without the students knowing anything about the model itself), the information still gets through to the students and their well-being, happiness and flourishing still increases. Therefore, any efforts to promote PERMA through athletics must begin with the coach. The coach must be exposed to the ideas and must live the ideas out by himself and this will be the best way to pass on the knowledge and results of the model on to the players.