# The Transformational Effect of Movies in Positive Psychology:
## Positive Cinema Therapy

## Introduction & Part I – Theory

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"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty." — Winston Churchill

Introduction

Positive psychology is a recent branch of psychology that studies the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. Positive psychologists seek "to find and nurture genius and talent," and "to make normal life more fulfilling (Compton, 2005). They describe the importance of understanding and enhancing subjective experiences, i.e. contentment and satisfaction with the past, happiness in the present, and hope and optimism for the future (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). They have developed a variety of techniques that encourage people to identify and further develop their own positive emotions, experiences, and character traits.

From a clinical standpoint this approach is not only about fixing what is broken but also about nurturing what is best (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Although initially developed as a way to advance well-being and optimal functioning in healthy people, positive psychology and specifically positive psychotherapy is now also used as a complement to psychotherapy (Duckworth, 2005).

Cinema Therapy is an innovative therapeutic modality that uses clients’ experiences with movies (mostly as homework assignments) for the therapeutic process. This approach lends itself very well to be combined with or integrated into positive psychotherapy. Films draw clients into the viewing experience, but at the same time — often more easily than in real life — afford a unique opportunity to retain a perspective outside this experience, the observer's view. Movies portray the subtleties of the human mind as well as many dimensions of human behavior. Because film characters frequently model the development of desired virtues and strengths, these movies can become natural vehicles for the processes of Positive Cinema Therapy.
Part I – Theory

1. Positive Psychology
The positive psychology movement focuses on the study of what constitutes the pleasant life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life, in which a person flourishes (Seligman, 2002b). Flourishing means to live within an optimal range of human functioning, building strengths, goodness, and resiliency. This contrasts with “languishing”, and with psychopathology. It is estimated that less than 20% of adults flourish (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005).

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi define positive psychology in the following way:

“The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present).

At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom.

At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic.” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5)

The following three major concerns can be delineated from this definition:

1. First, positive psychology takes an interest in positive subjective experiences, such as subjective well-being, joy, optimism, and hope.
2. Second, positive psychology has an interest in studying the personality traits of thriving individuals, with a particular focus on character strengths and virtues, such as courage, perseverance, open-mindedness, and wisdom.
3. Finally, at the social psychological level, positive psychology intents to identify, study, and enhance those qualities of social institutions that sustain and enhance positive subjective experiences and adaptive personality traits of individuals.
(Gillham & Seligman, 1999; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000)
**History**

In many ways, positive psychology builds on key tenets of humanistic psychology. Humanistic psychologists — such as Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Erich Fromm — also developed successful theories and practices that involved human happiness.

Maslow’s work in self-actualization is considered the bedrock upon which the positive psychology movement is built. He mentioned concepts such as individuation and peak experiences and identified traits of self-actualized people that are similar to the character strengths identified and used in some positive psychology interventions (Maslow, 1971). He originally coined the phrase “positive psychology” (Maslow, 1987, p. 354, original work published 1954), more than four decades prior to Martin Seligman’s use of the term for his own work and that of others. Therefore Peterson and Seligman (2004) credit Maslow as a pioneer in the study of character strengths and virtues.

Rogers’ client-centered therapy was based on the theory that people could improve their lives by expressing their authentic selves. Notions such as full functioning (Rogers, 1961), maturity (Allport, 1961), and positive mental health (Jahoda, 1958) can be found in the literature.

Recently the theories of human flourishing developed by these humanistic psychologists have found empirical support from studies by humanistic and positive psychologists, especially in the area of self-determination theory (Patterson & Joseph, 2007). Therefore Robbins, a humanistically oriented psychologist, states, “Contemporary psychology can finally reap the benefits of all those humanistic researchers who suffered the cold shoulder of mainstream psychology for so many years. Apparently, it took a Trojan horse like Seligman to finally sneak humanistic psychology through the front door with a different name and face.” (Robbins, 2008, p. 4)

From the perspective of positive psychologists, mainstream psychology had long been enamored of the dark side of human existence, hardly ever exploring a more positive view of the mind. "Psychologists rarely think much about what makes people happy. They focus instead on what makes them sad, on what makes them anxious. That is why psychology journals have published 45,000 articles in the last 30 years on depression, but only 400 on joy. Joy is not covered by insurance, nor does it lead to tenure." (International Herald Tribune, May 4, 1998.)
In 1998 when Seligman, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, chose positive psychology as the theme for his term as president of the American Psychological Association:

"I believe America is fed up with the victim model and wants to make life better. I don't want to cast out the disease model. But we need a science that tells us about human strengths. I want to remind psychologists of normal people. ..."

Before World War II, psychology had three missions: curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent. After the war, two events changed the face of psychology. In 1946, the Veterans Administration was created, and practicing psychologists found they could make a living treating mental illness. In 1947, the National Institute of Mental Health was created, and academic psychologists discovered they could get grants for research on mental illness.

Fifty years later, I want to remind our field that it has been sidetracked. Psychology is not just the study of weakness and damage, it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken, it is nurturing what is best within ourselves.

Fifty years of working in a medical model on personal weakness and on the damaged brain has left the mental-health professions ill-equipped to do effective prevention.” (Seligman, 1999, p. 1)

Subsequently, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi speculated that psychology focused on the disease model because the premise was adopted that negative motivations are authentic and positive emotions are derivative. They considered the following explanation for this premise:

“Negative emotions and experiences may be more urgent and therefore may override positive ones. This would make evolutionary sense. Because negative emotions often reflect immediate problems or objective dangers, they should be powerful enough to force people to stop, increase their vigilance, reflect on their behavior, and change their actions if necessary. (Of course, in some dangerous situations, it is most adaptive to respond without taking a great deal of time to reflect.) In contrast, when people are adapting well to the world, no such alarm is needed. Experiences that
promote happiness often seem to pass effortlessly. Therefore, on one level, psychology's focus on the negative may reflect differences in the survival value of negative versus positive emotions.” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000a, p. 13)

For several years now universities in the United States have offered courses in positive psychology. In 2006 positive psychology was the most popular class at Harvard University, and the University of Pennsylvania has a popular graduate program in which students can earn Master of Arts degrees in Applied Positive Psychology. Two scientific, peer-reviewed journals specifically address positive psychology constructs: *The Journal of a Happiness Studies* (published in the Netherlands) and *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008)

“In less than a decade, positive psychology has flourished and has influenced research and clinical work around the world. The movement has fascinated the work of numerous researchers, scholars, and clinicians by providing a different way to look at people and their behavior. Handbooks of positive psychology that address assessment, theory, research, and practice now abound (Joseph & Liney, 2006; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Lopez & Snyder, 2004; Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Specific strengths-based work is emerging in organizations (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001), in psychotherapy (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006), in workbooks (Bolt, 2004), and in theoretical models referred to as strength-centered therapy (Wong, 2006). In particular, books and articles addressing the historical and scientific study of happiness have proliferated (see Ben-Shahar, 2007; Gilbert, 2006; Haidt, 2006; Hecht, 2007; Layard, 2005; Lyubomirsky, 2001; 2008; McMahon, 2006).” (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008, pp. 3, 4)

**Benefits of Optimism, Positive Emotions and Values**

Studies have shown that optimistic or happy people are healthier, more successful, and live longer than other people. Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, and Gruenwald (2000), as well as Salovey, Rothman, Detweiler, and Steward (2000) report on the relationship between positive emotions and physical health.

The following benefits of positive emotions and values, including optimism, have been reported (Seligman, 2002a):

- Optimists live eight to nine years longer than pessimists.
• Of a group of men who survive their first heart attack, 15 of the 16 most pessimistic died within 8 years, but only 5 of the 16 least pessimistic died within that period. Optimism was a better predictor of survival than cholesterol, blood pressure and weight.

• According to research results, pessimistic people appeared more prone to accidents and violence, including car wrecks, household mishaps, even homicide.

• In a study of women newly diagnosed with breast cancer, the women with an optimistic disposition were more likely to acknowledge the seriousness of the disease. They experienced less distress and took more active steps to cope with it.

• In another study, the researchers found that optimists had higher levels of disease-fighting killer cells in their blood than did the pessimists. An optimistic frame of mind seems to modulate the nervous system in a way that bolsters immune-system defenses.

• Researchers performed content analysis of essays written by Harvard men in 1946 to determine optimism and depression. Up to age 40, this was a poor predictor of health; all that mattered was their health at 25. But from 40 to 65, optimism was an important predictor. In old age, genetics takes over.

• Those who are happy at age 18 make $25-30,000 more annual income at age 35.

• Researchers examined photos in a college yearbook. 25 years later, the ones who had genuine smiles had fewer divorces and more marital satisfaction.

• Positive values such as the following seem to enable people to live well despite life events around them: 1. finding good things about each event that happens in their lives, 2. having compassion for themselves and others, 3. being creative and finding opportunities for development.

• Because positive emotions build resilience, they allow people to bounce back faster from negative experiences. Resilience buffers against depression.

• People who are tested as pessimistic are 2 to 8 times as likely to become depressed when bad things happen. Early experiences with optimism help
• Pessimistic tend to believe nothing they can do matters, so they don't try to avoid bad events.

• Optimists and pessimists have different views on the permanence and pervasiveness of bad events. Pessimists tend to see bad events as pervasive. Optimists can fail in one domain and not generalize it to all other domains.

• Negative emotions narrow one’s response to "fight or flight." Positive emotions broaden the range of responses, leading to behavioral flexibility and emotional growth.

• The mechanism of optimism or pessimism is a person’s explanatory style, the way they think about setbacks. Therefore, optimists get better after defeat; pessimists get worse.

• In sports, if a game is close, optimists do better than their usual performance; pessimists do worse.

• Optimism can lead to trying hard. This pays off in professions where trying hard is important.

Flow

The concept of flow is now one of the most important concepts in positive psychology. It was, for a long time, ignored by mainstream psychology.

Before it was embraced by positive psychologists, it was assimilated within the humanistic tradition of Maslow and Rogers (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). The term flow was originally created by Csikszentmihalyi, for a psychological state that accompanies highly engaging activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). It is the mental state of operation in which a person is fully immersed in what he or she is doing with energized focus, full involvement, and achieving success in the process of the activity. Flow happens when a person’s highest strengths meets her or his highest challenges. (Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).
Csikszentmihályi identifies the following as accompanying an experience of flow:

1. **Clear goals** (expectations and rules are discernible and goals are attainable and align appropriately with one's skill set and abilities).
2. **Concentrating and focusing**, a high degree of concentration on a limited field of attention (a person engaged in the activity will have the opportunity to focus and to delve deeply into it).
3. **A loss of the feeling of self-consciousness**, the merging of action and awareness.
4. **Distorted sense of time**, one's subjective experience of time is altered.
5. Direct and immediate **feedback** (successes and failures in the course of the activity are apparent, so that behavior can be adjusted as needed).
6. **Balance between ability level and challenge** (the activity is neither too easy nor too difficult).
7. A sense of **personal control** over the situation or activity.
8. The activity is **intrinsically rewarding**, so there is an effortlessness of action.
9. People become absorbed in their activity, and focus of awareness is narrowed down to the activity itself — action and awareness are merging.

(Csikszentmihályi, 1975)

### Classifications of Virtues and Strengths

To counter the traditional diagnostic focus on pathology, Seligman and Peterson formalized the tenets of positive psychology in their groundbreaking manual, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (CSV) (Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). This handbook provides a counterpoint to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Just as the DSM classifies a range of psychiatric disorders, the CSV provides details and classifications for various strengths that enable people to thrive. Therefore the CSV serves as a theoretical framework to assist in developing practical applications for positive psychology.

The CSV identifies a comprehensive system of **six classes of core virtues**, made up of **24 measurable character strengths**. The virtues can be found (nearly) universally in over 200 virtue catalogues spanning more than 3,000 years and countries across cultures, ranging from major world religions to the philosophy of Aristotle to the writings of Benjamin Franklin to the samurai code. (Peterson, & Seligman, 2004)
“Virtues are those universal, core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers. Strengths are the psychological ingredients or specific routes through which virtues are displayed.” (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008, p. 3)

1. Wisdom and Knowledge

Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge:

- **Creativity** [originality, ingenuity]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it

- **Curiosity** [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]: Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering

- **Open-mindedness** [judgment, critical thinking]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly

- **Love of learning**: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows

- **Perspective** [wisdom]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people

2. Courage

Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal:

- **Bravery** [valor]: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
- **Persistence** [perseverance, industriousness]: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; “getting it out the door”; taking pleasure in completing tasks

- **Integrity** [authenticity, honesty]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions

- **Vitality** [zest, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated

### 3. Humanity

Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others:

- **Love**: Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people

- **Kindness** [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them

- Social intelligence [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick

### 4. Justice

Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life:

- **Citizenship** [social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share

- **Fairness**: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.
- **Leadership**: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the time maintain good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.

5. **Temperance**

Strengths that protect against excess:

- **Forgiveness and mercy**: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful

- **Humility/Modesty**: Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than anyone else

- **Prudence**: Being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted

- **Self-regulation [self-control]**: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions

6. **Transcendence**

Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning:

- **Appreciation of beauty and excellence [awe, wonder, elevation]**: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience

- **Gratitude**: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks

- **Hope [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]**: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about

- **Humor [playfulness]**: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
- **Spirituality** [religiousness, faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort

(Peterson, & Seligman, 2004)

Not every imaginable strength is explicitly listed in one of these 24 strengths. Certain qualities may be subsumed under one of these strengths or they are a combination of more than one strength. “For example, ‘patience’ can be mostly explained by the strengths of open-mindedness and fairness, while ‘trust’ can be seen as a combination of strengths such as perspective, integrity, care, and social services.” (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008, p. ix)

**The character strengths are defined as satisfying most of the ten following criteria. They are**

1. fulfilling
2. intrinsically valuable, in an ethical sense
3. non-rivalrous
4. not the opposite of a desirable trait
5. trait-like (habitual patterns that are relatively stable over time)
6. not a combination of the other character strengths in the CSV
7. personified (at least in the popular imagination) by people made famous through story, song, etc.
8. observable in child prodigies (This criterion is not applicable to all character strengths.)
9. absent in some individuals
10. nurtured by societal norms and institutions.

(Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

The five highest strengths of a person are called his or her *signature strengths* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Seligman (2002a) proposed that one way to enhance engagement and flow is to identify people’s signature strengths and then help them to find opportunities to use these strengths more. “This view is as old as Aristotle and consonant with more modern psychological notions such as Roger’s (1951) ideal of the fully functioning person, Maslow’s (1971) concept of self-actualization, and Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory.” (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006, p. 777)
Critique

The most relevant criticism of positive psychology claims that this approach is too “Pollyanna”: It succumbs to our culture’s tyranny of the positive attitude, and fails to appreciate the adaptive and constructive aspects of unpleasant states of mind (Held, 2002; Lazarus, 2003; Woolfolk, 2002). This critique by many psychologists resulted from the fact that positive psychology had been identified as a hedonic approach to psychology. The hedonic quality of current experience had originally been the basic building block of positive psychology (Kahneman, 1999; Diener, 2000) as it focused mainly on subjective well-being (Massimini & Delle Fave, 2000), on optimal experience (Peterson, 2000), and on optimism (Myers, 2000).

In response to this critique, positive psychology shifted its emphasis from the mostly hedonic vision to a vision grounded in the Aristotelian concept of eudaimonia (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Hedonic well-being is defined in terms of the ratio of pleasure to pain in one’s life (Diener, 2000; Kahnemann; Diener, & Schwartz, 1999). Eudaimonia has different connotations, as it is less subjective. "Human flourishing" is often used as a translation. A person who experiences eudaimonic well-being flourishes in terms of his or her character strengths and virtues, including among other things: autonomy, mastery of the environment, personal growth, positive interpersonal relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Ryff, 1989). The concept of eudaimonic well-being derives from the Aristotelian virtue theory. “Aristotle (2004) and his followers conceptualized well-being as composed of an individual’s virtuous traits, and only a happiness that flows from legitimate harmony of the virtues was thought to be a genuine happiness. All other forms of happiness were understood to be superficial and fleeting.” (Robbins, 2008, p. 7)

From this follows that positive psychologists have come to understand and appreciate the limitations associated with seeing their field as “happiology” or a paradigm shift in the science of psychology (Peterson, 2006). They don’t consider positive psychology as simply positive thinking, pop psychology, or feel-good spirituality. “Ultimately, the way of the positive psychologist must be to reflect on the nature of living systems – systems in which positive emotions act with negative emotions, character strengths act with character weaknesses, and human virtues act with human vices – intrapersonally, interpersonally, and extrapersonally” (Hogan, 2005).
Seligman also states that positive psychology does not equal Polyanna as he explains: “It is not the job of Positive Psychology to tell you that you should be optimistic, or spiritual, or kind or good-humored; it is rather to describe the consequences of these traits. … What you do with this information depends on your own values and goals.” (Seligman, 2002a, p. 129) Later he says: “Although there are many studies that correlate positivity with later health, longevity, sociability, and success, the balance of the evidence suggests that in some situations negative thinking leads to more accuracy. Where accuracy is tied to potentially catastrophic outcomes (for example, when an airplane pilot is deciding whether to de-ice the wings of her airplane), we should all be pessimists.” (Seligman, 2002a, p. 288) There are some situations where being "negative" is a requirement of the job. Pessimism is useful for certain professions, such as law. Pessimistic lawyers do better, because they need to envision every possible disaster. Seligman suggests that this explains why lawyers have a by far higher than average rate of severe depression and other psychiatric conditions. He emphasizes the importance of keeping these "negativity" skills carefully contextualized. (Seligman, 2002a)

The positive psychology movement has also been criticized for contributing to an artificial dichotomy that pits the DSM against the CSV. Peterson (2006) disagrees as he affirms that this movement seeks to integrate the fullness of the human experience, which includes both good and bad aspects.
2. Positive Psychology Coaching

Positive psychology coaching combines positive psychology with coaching by helping clients developing and maintaining virtues and strengths to encourage, challenge, and support them in achieving their personal and professional potential. Through this process, individuals focus on the skills and actions needed to successfully produce their personally relevant results. Positive psychology provides a range of interventions from which a meaningful coaching practice can be developed. As a result of successful positive psychology coaching, clients experience fresh perspectives on personal challenges and opportunities, enhance thinking and decision-making skills, enhance interpersonal effectiveness, and increase confidence in carrying out their chosen work and life roles (Biswas-Diener, Dean, 2007).

Coaches guide their clients through the following process:

1. Identifying specific goals
2. Setting goals high enough to truly challenge client
3. Focusing on the specific steps toward these goals
4. Creating strategies to make goals happen
5. Managing time and resources effectively
6. Constantly reevaluating progress, recognizing and applauding client’s achievement, and identifying new goals for which to strive.

Examples of different kind of coaches are:

- **Personal or life coaches** help to realize and accomplish particular life goals.
- **Business coaches** help to make positive changes in a business such as increase effectiveness, build and sustain momentum, increase profits, etc.
- **Executive coaches** help people at the top of an organization improve decision-making ability and skills required to lead others.
- **Corporate coaches** provide coaching services to individual employees.
- **Sports coaches** get athletes to perform better.
- **Niche coaches** have a clear identified area or issue such as weight loss, fitness, book publishing, etc.
3. Positive Psychotherapy

Despite the term psychology in its name, positive psychotherapy is not what drives the field of positive psychology, nor is this its main topic. Generally speaking, positive psychology is not meant to be a treatment for the mentally ill.

But “prevention researchers have discovered that there are human strengths that act as buffers against mental illness: courage, future mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skill, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, and the capacity for flow and insight, to name several” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7). Therefore the core philosophy of positive psychology as a “build what’s strong” approach can augment the “fix what’s wrong” approach of more traditional psychotherapy (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006).

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) encourage clinicians to recognize that much of the best work they already do is to amplify strengths rather than repair the weaknesses of their clients.

Definition

The term positive psychotherapy was originally created by Nossrat Peseschkian in 1968 in Germany. His approach is transcultural and consists of a synthesis of psychodynamic and behavior-therapeutic elements. It is based on a positive conception of humanity, and has an integral and holistic approach. (Peseschkian, 1977)

In the United States, therapies that attend explicitly to the positives of clients were first created by Fordyce (1977). He developed and tested a “happiness” intervention consisting of 14 tactics, such as being more active, socializing more, engaging in meaningful work, forming closer and deeper relationships with loved ones, lowering expectations, and prioritizing being happy. Fordyce found that students who received detailed instructions on how to do these were happier and showed fewer depressive symptoms than a control group (Fordyce, 1977, 1983).

More recently, Fava and colleagues (Fava, 1999; Fava & Ruini, 2003) developed well-being therapy, which is based on the multidimensional model of psychological well being proposed by Ryff and Singer (1998). This approach consists of building environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life,
autonomy, self-acceptance, and positive relations with others, and is provided after patients with affective disorder have successfully completed a regime of drugs or psychotherapy. Similarly, Frisch (2006) proposed quality of life therapy, which integrates a life satisfaction approach with cognitive therapy. Both Fava’s and Frisch’s approaches explicitly target faulty cognitions, troubling emotions, or maladjusted relationships, offering a well-being component as a supplement. (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006)

Seligman and some of his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania experimented with positive psychology interventions for psychological problems. Because the researchers derived the principles that they applied in their research project from the field of positive psychology, they called their approach positive psychotherapy (PPT). (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006) For the purpose of this course, I will use their understanding of this term as opposed to the above-mentioned definition by Peseschkian.

Critique

Critics had believed that interventions aimed at making people happier will only work for a limited time because they may have inborn temperaments that function like set-points. Eventually, the critics had claimed, people always return to their baseline level of happiness.

This critical view was based on a series of extensive studies conducted on identical twins reared miles apart. These studies revealed that, no matter where we live or what we do, we have a consistent level of happiness (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). Certain events take us above this baseline, others take us below, but no matter how glorious or traumatic the event, we return to our baseline within months. Therefore everybody’s happiness set-point, remains constant throughout life. We cannot permanently increase or decrease our happiness levels in the long term. (Lucas, 2007)

This pessimistic view has been challenged by drawing on neuroplasticity as evidence that our happiness level is not set in stone (Doidge, 2007.) Neuroscientists have discovered that the brain can grow new neurons and change its structure throughout life. With consistent effort the brain can rewire itself. The reason that most people’s happiness remains constant is simply that they don’t know how to increase it (Ben-Shahar, 2007). However, the new evidence now suggests that increasing happiness is in fact possible (Begley, 2007).
Research

Although Seligman and his colleagues believed that PPT can be an effective treatment for many disorders, they focused in their empirical study on depression as the primary target of a randomized controlled trial. In a variety of settings, the researchers used interventions for depression that — in contrast to traditional therapeutic approaches — did not directly target depressive symptoms. Based on their belief that depression not only correlates with lack of engagement in the main areas of life but that lack of engagement may cause depression, they aimed for increased positive emotions, character strengths, engagement, and meaning rather than decreased depression symptoms. (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006)

Therefore PPT rests on the hypothesis that depression can be treated effectively not only by reducing its negative symptoms but also by directly building positive resources. Seligman and the other researchers tested whether these resources can successfully counteract negative symptoms and buffer against their future reoccurrence. In analyzing the nature and benefits of these targets, they benefited from scientific gains that the field of positive psychology had reached (e.g., Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Haidt, 2006; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Seligman, 2002a; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). “In doing so, positive psychology has drawn on traditional scientific methods to understand and treat psychopathology” (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006, p. 775).

The study found that positive psychology exercises delivered on the Web showed very little effect on happiness during the first week, but relieved depressive symptoms one month to six months later for at least six months compared with placebo interventions, the effects of which lasted less than a week (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006).

These results can be considered an important indicator that the above mentioned critique of positive psychotherapy does not apply in many cases.
Positive Psychotherapy Exercises

The exercises used in the above-mentioned study aimed at increasing positive emotion, engagement, and meaning to promote highly general ways of buffering against a variety of disorders and troubles (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006).

The first six of the following 21 exercises were used in this research project:

I Using Strengths

Researchers have developed the "VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire” to allow people to identify their five signature strengths among 24 personality strengths. A nonprofit organization named Values in Action (VIA) Institute developed this questionnaire, an online self-report survey (http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu) that is based on the CSV classification system. (Peterson, & Seligman, 2004) Clinicians can assign this online assessment tool to their clients.

This self-report survey needs to be distinguished from Gallup’s popular StrengthsFinder (Fredstrom, Harter & Tucker). The latter was also developed for the Internet, but is used more as a talent assessment instrument, while the VIA-IS strengths questionnaire serves as a strength assessment tool.

Exercise:
1. Take the VIA strengths questionnaire to assess your top five strengths.
2. Spend the next week finding novel ways to use your signature strengths in your daily life.
3. Plan an activity with a friend such that each of you can use your signature strengths.

People who frequently experience gratitude tend to be less depressed than individuals without this strength. The following three exercises help develop or increase gratitude (Past):

II Three Good Things/Blessings

We tend to spend more time thinking about what has gone wrong than we do basking in what has gone right. Ruminating on what goes wrong may lead to increased sadness. Focusing on your happiness may increase it. It takes voluntary effort not to just focus on the negative.
Exercise:
Each evening, for the next week, right before you go to bed, write down three good things that happened (large or small) and why you think they happened.

III Obituary/Biography

Exercise:
1. Imagine that you have passed away after living a fruitful and satisfying life. What would you want your obituary to say?
2. Write a one to two page essay summarizing what you would like to be remembered for the most.

IV Gratitude Visit

Exercise:
1. Think of someone to whom you are very grateful, but who you have never properly thanked.
2. Compose a letter to them describing your gratitude, describing in concrete terms what they did for you and how it affected your life.
3. Read the letter to that person by phone or in person.

V Active/Constructive Responding:

The active-constructive response builds satisfaction, intimacy, and trust in a relationship. This behavior can lead to more daily happiness and fewer conflicts. People who are good at expressing their emotions are naturally better at active-constructive responses.

Exercise:
1. Listen carefully when people you care about report good events. 2. Respond in a visibly positive and enthusiastic way to the good news.
3. Record the events each night.

At least once a day, respond actively and constructively in this way to someone you know.
The following exercise helps develop or increase pleasure (Present):

VI *Savoring*

Savoring is the process of mindfully engaging in thoughts or activities that encourage positive events to lead to positive feelings.

**Exercise:**
1. Once a day, take the time to enjoy something that you usually hurry through (examples: eating a meal, taking a shower, walking to class).
2. When it’s over, write down what you did, how you did it differently, and how it felt compared to when you rush through it.

Other positive psychotherapy exercises:

VII *Mirroring*

**Exercise:**
1. Make a list of 10 people to ask the following:
2. "What qualities do I bring to the world?"
3. If they say something negative, this is your survival mechanism, not your essence.
4. Collect the positive responses, and see which ideas repeatedly show up.
5. Compare to your top results from the Authentic Happiness VIA Signature Strengths Survey.
6. Practice seeing other people as their essence, not their survival mechanism. (Haidt, 2006)

VIII *Satisficing*

While choice is essential to well-being, too much choice can undermine it. Two strategies in life can be identified as *maximizing* and *satisficing*.

Satisficers are content to find an option that is "good enough," terminating the search once they find an acceptable choice. Maximizers feel the need to do an exhaustive search for all the possibilities, to make sure they make the one best choice. They are more perfectionistic, less happy, less optimistic and less satisfied with life. Maximizers are more apt to compare themselves with other people, have lower self-esteem, and are more subject to regret. They are more likely to be depressed.
Exercise:
1. Learn to recognize when you're stuck because you're maximizing instead of satisficing.
2. Learn to accept the constraints. Find ways to impose them on yourself. This is very freeing, especially if you tend to always want to keep your options open.
3. Learn that good enough is good enough, all the time.
4. Learn to regret less. Focus more on the positive aspects of your decisions and less on the negative aspects. Practice being grateful for what is good in our daily life rather than being disappointed in what is bad. Make gratitude exercises a daily habit.
5. Choose when to choose. Delegate decisions to review magazines, friends with expertise in that area, advisors, etc. Save the effort and energy for domains you know or need to know.
6. Think about what it is we really want, rather than just going out and being swamped by features.
7. Satisficing does not come naturally to many of us. You might have to work hard to internalize it and make it part of your life.
(Schwartz, 2004).

IX One Door Closes, Another Door Opens

Exercise:
1. Think of three times when you lost out at something important, whether because of bad luck, a missed opportunity, etc.
2. Write down your experience. What was the door that closed on you, and what was the door that opened?
3. Then, the next time you face a difficult situation, look at the problem in terms of the opportunities it presents.
(Seligman, 1991)

X Stopping Catastrophic Thoughts

Exercise:
When you find yourself catastrophizing about a negative event
1. write down the absolute worst case (your catastrophic thoughts),
2. the perfect world best case (exaggerated, extremely unlikely positive outcomes), and
3. the real world most likely case (realistic analysis of what's likely).
(Reivich & Shatte, 2002)
This may be difficult to do in the heat of the moment. It may be helpful to start with relaxation techniques such as focusing on your breath.

XII *ABCDE Disputation*

Optimism appears to be learnable. Cognitive therapy is helpful for depression. The cognitive approach to learning optimism involves disputing pessimistic thoughts. (Seligman, 1991)

**Exercise:**
When adversity happens, avoid the tendency to "catastrophize." View catastrophic thoughts as if said by someone who hates you, and dispute them.
1. Adversity — Identify a recent adverse event.
2. Beliefs (what you say to yourself) - Identify your interpretation of the event.
3. Consequences (emotions and behavior that result from beliefs about adversity) — What happened afterwards?
4. Disputation — Dispute your beliefs, especially any catastrophic thoughts or over-generalizations; view the event more realistically.
5. Energization — Focus that energy on making things better instead of reinforcing your pessimistic beliefs.
(Seligman, 2002a)

If you tend to see things as unchangeable, train yourself to find one tiny thing you're able to change.

Disputation can also help with other negative emotions, such as anger.

XII *Good Consumerism*

**Exercise:**
Give gifts that will add flow or meaning to the lives of people you care about.
Examples: a coupon for a seminary retreat, photo albums for your spouse, goats for the third world, a coupon for a massage, etc.
XIII Gaining or Increasing Happiness

This exercise aims to increase
1. the pleasant life — defined by how you feel
   • contentment about the past (gratitude, forgiveness)
   • pleasure and positive emotions in the present
   • hope and optimism for the future
2. the engaged life — being in a state of flow, fully in the present moment; knowing and deploying your highest strengths.
3. the meaningful life — feeling that your life serves a larger purpose.

Exercise:
Every morning, plan three things you'll do that day — one that will give you pleasure, one that will help put you in a state of flow, and one that will give your life meaning, or one activity that encompasses all three components.

XIV Autonomy and Individuality

The more autonomy and freedom of choice in our lives, the happier we are.

Exercise:
1. Look for opportunities in your daily life, at work, and at home, to express your free choice and independence.
2. Organize your space.
3. Devote some time to activities you enjoy.
   (Lopper, 2007)

XV Feelings Fade

We systematically over-estimate the duration of our feelings about both positive and negative future events and adapt to new situations quickly. Therefore, a negative event you fear, if it occurs, won't trouble you for as long as you now think it will. Conversely, the glow from a positive event won't last forever either.
   (Lopper, 2007)

Exercise:
1. Be aware that the future is not as bright as we hope nor as dim as we fear.
2. Adjust your expectations accordingly.
XVI Taking Responsibility for Your Own Happiness

Exercise:
No one is going to make you happy. You have to do it for yourself. You have to choose to let things go and to choose to find neutral ground.

XVII Have A Good Day

Exercise:
1. Set up a journal or daily record and record your major activities each day for at least two weeks. At the end of each day, evaluate the "goodness" of that day on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 is one of the best days of your life, 5 is an average day, and 1 is one of the worst days of your life.
2. At the end of the two week period go back over your records and look for a correlation between days you scored 6 or higher and your activities for that day. Look for activities that are present in some form during each good day.
3. Look for ways to include these activities in more of your days and you will have more good days.
(Lopper, 2007)

XVIII Don’t Believe Everything You Think!

Do you believe everything you read? Do you believe everything you hear? Your thoughts don’t always give you a true glimpse of reality. And when you hold the power to shine the light on them, you can take away their power to cause you suffering.

Exercise:
1. Write down your negative thought.
2. Ask yourself, ‘is it true?’
3. Can you be certain it is absolutely true?
4. How do you react when you believe that thought? How do you treat others when you believe that thought? How do you treat yourself when you believe that thought?
5. Who would you be without that thought? How would you be different if you didn’t believe that thought?
(Katie, 2002)
IXX Letting Go of Grudges

People who are forgiving have less anger, less depression, less hostility, and are less neurotic and less vengeful. Forgiveness increases your own happiness.

**Exercise:**
1. Choose someone you have a grudge against.
2. On a blank piece of paper, draw a circle in the center and write a few words capturing the essence of the grudge.
3. Fill the rest of the page with at least 15 blank circles.
4. Fill each circle with a word or phrase describing something about the person for which you are grateful.
5. Hold the page at arm's length and reflect on how the grudge gets lost in a sea of gratitude.

(Luskin)

XX Fun and Philanthropy

Psychology studies show that an orientation to the welfare of others is, in the long run, more satisfying than an orientation to one's own pleasure (Lopper, 2007).

**Exercise:**
1. Undertake one pleasurable activity for yourself and one philanthropic activity that will benefit another person.
2. Write down your reactions and feelings as a result of this activity.

(Lopper, 2007)

XXI Practicing Random Acts of Kindness

**Exercise:**
Practice five random acts of kindness a day. It can be something as simple as telling your coworker, "That outfit looks good on you."
4. Positive Cinema Therapy

The term *Cinema Therapy* was originally created by Berg-Cross, Jennings and Baruch (1990) to describe the use of films in psychotherapy. As clients respond to movies emotionally, their reactions reflect their inner world. With Cinema Therapy, psychotherapists make use of this reflection by using movies as an adjunct to traditional methods. Watching films enhances – but never replaces – therapeutic treatment.

In Positive Cinema Therapy, specific films are prescribed in which film characters model virtues and strengths. When clients watch a film with cinematic elevation, they are likely to be influenced by the values, belief, and behaviors being depicted in a movie. “This makes future healthy, moral action more likely for the viewer. At the very least, the viewer leaves the film with new ideas about moral values and ethical behavior.” (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008, p. 9) This concept underlies Positive Cinema Therapy.

Movies can also help clients to learn “by proxy”, how not to do something or not to behave in pursuit of their goals, because they see the negative consequences of a character’s action (Solomon, 2001). It is often helpful to use movies in this way, when clients struggle with addictions, or when a couple works on their communication. Here films are used as cautionary tales.

**How Films Aid the Positive Psychotherapy Process**

“The medium of film, more than any other art form, is able to portray the subtleties of the human mind — thoughts, emotions, instincts, and motives — and their impact on behavior. This makes positive psychology movies a natural vehicle for examining character strengths and how they are developed and maintained.” (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008, p. 5)

“Movies affect us powerfully because the synergistic impact of music, dialogue, lighting, camera angles, and sound effects enables a film to bypass ordinary defensive censors in us” (Fischoff, Stuart, 2006). Many films have such a supportive effect on the therapeutic process because many movies, like dreams, are full of metaphors and symbols (Gordon, 1978). Metaphors and symbols can affect us on a deep level. Carl G. Jung (1964, p. 35) wrote: “As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason.”
While watching a movie, clients are likely to be absorbed in a trancelike state, similar to the state often achieved via guided visualizations or hypnotherapy. Being “drawn into” a movie is similar to hypnotherapy, where teaching tales can be used in formal trance states, as well as in open-eye-trance when stories are told without formal induction (Rosen, 1982). Listening to these stories in a focused way creates a form of trance. Clients enter into this state, while listening, because they let go of distracting thoughts and issues. Metaphoric tales include a form of indirect suggestion, in which subliminal commands are conveyed. These embedded commands are used to circumvent resistance to hypnotic suggestions through unconscious learning (Hudson & Martin, 1992). During unconscious learning, clients intuitively understand the meaning of dreams and symbols and other unconscious expressions. People tend to resist commands, but they don’t resist descriptions. Therefore clients accept imbedded suggestions with a reduced critical sense. (Erickson & Rossi, 1980)

Another reason for the therapeutic affect of movies is that they usually follow the pattern of the mythological Hero’s Journey (Campbell, 1973). Carl Gustav Jung (1927) said that mythic stories make up a collective “dream.” The whole of mythology can be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious. Films are a significant part of our evolving mythology. The individual is linked to the past of the whole species and the long stretch of evolution of the organism.

The stages of the Hero’s Journey can be traced in all kinds of stories, not just those that feature heroic physical action and adventure, but also in romance, comedy, and thrillers, etc. “The protagonist of every story is the hero of a journey, even if the path leads only in his own mind or into the realm of relationships” (Volger, 1998, p. 13).

Cathie Glenn Sturdevant (1998) describes the typical plot development according to modern rules of screenplay writing, which is similar to the Hero’s Journey. The main character in a movie commits to a quest after a surprising loss of innocence, goes through a phase of inner conflict about taking on a challenge, and reaches a point of no return. Then the film hero acts despite fear, releases old ideas, renews his or her commitment, acts without fear, sometimes revises plans into realistic goals, and concludes the original quest by resolving it from a new perspective. The protagonist models these accomplishments for clients in the Positive Cinema Therapy work.

Yet another reason for the therapeutic affect of movies is explained by research about accelerated learning. This research indicates that acquisition and retention
are enhanced when multiple senses are engaged during the learning process. Howard Gardner (1993 a and b) suggests that we have multiple “intelligences.” The more of these intelligences we access, the faster we learn, because by doing so we employ different methods of information processing. Sturdevant (1998) hypothesizes that watching movies can engage most of these intelligences:

- The film’s plot engages our logical intelligence
- Script dialogue engages the linguistic intelligence
- Pictures, colors, and symbols on the screen engage the visual-spatial intelligence
- Sounds and music engage our musical intelligence
- Storytelling engages the interpersonal intelligence
- Movement engages the kinesthetic intelligence
- Self-reflection or inner guidance, as demonstrated especially in inspirational films, engages the intrapsychic intelligence.

Movies often speak to clients on a variety of these psychological and physiological channels; and the effect is synergistic. They learn from the film characters, who model virtues and strengths, to help them access and develop their potential.

**Why Positive Cinema Therapy Works**

Clients usually need guidance to recall forgotten and discounted resources of strengths and virtues, and to become aware of opportunities for those resources to be applied (Hesley & Hesley, 2001). Therapists need to encourage them to see how the film characters find solutions to their problems and help them recognize which of the characters’ skills are familiar and accessible to them. If they discount the skills and strengths that they have in common with the movie characters, this needs to be pointed out. A shift in the clients’ perspective has happened when they acknowledge the appropriate resources from their own repertoire.

Clients’ projections onto a film, the inferences and assumptions they make, and their openness to the movie all influence how they are affected by it. Usually, they experience the following stages of cognitive and emotional interpretation through identification and projection:
1. Disassociation
   Client watches character(s) outside their internal frame of reference
2. Identification through projection
   Client begins to identify with a character, situation, etc.
3. Internalization
   Client develops sense of ownership of what was felt through character, scene, and situation and feels less alone
4. Inquiry into transference or projection
   Client can examine and work with issues, which were first safely “outside” and now have been identified

These stages can be described to clients in the following way:

1. Watching a character outside yourself in a movie.
2. Beginning to identify with a character, scene, etc. - “I feel like a character,” or “I hate what he is doing.”
3. Starting to develop a sense of ownership of what was felt through a character or scene. “This feels exactly like my life.”
4. Examining and working with positive or negative qualities, which first were “outside of ourselves but on the screen” and now are recognized as your own.

How Positive Cinema Therapy Works

The above CVS classification of virtues and strengths is useful as a basic structure for the applications (see Part II) of Positive Cinema Therapy. Detailed examples and descriptions of several movies that portray virtues and strengths will prepare the reader to make appropriate film suggestions. These movies provide ideas and inspiration for clients to develop positive emotions, experiences, as well as strengths of character, and use these strengths to overcome obstacles and adversity. Films will be selected and categorized in an eclectic fashion to provide a variety of options for the different treatment needs and film preferences of clients.

If clients understand what the therapist intends with suggesting a movie, they are better able to focus their intention and subsequently benefit more from viewing the film. Therefore it is recommended that clinicians mention, when they make their viewing suggestions, on which virtue or strength a client needs to focus.
Niemiec & Wedding (2008, p. 8) argue that the appropriate movies speak to the “unspoiled spot that is present in all of us, where people escape from their lives into themselves and come out feeling better, stronger, and more willing to take healthy action” (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008, p. 8). They suggest choosing a film that can create “cinematic elevation” based on Haidt’s (2003) definition of elevation, which has the following components:

1) Witnessing acts of moral beauty (e.g., humanity, courage, justice).
2) The physical sensation of warmth, glowing, or openness in the chest; and/or tingling in the skin, particularly along the back, neck, and head.
3) A motivation to move toward higher morals, e.g., helping others, or becoming better oneself.

“It is common for viewers to feel elevation during an inspiring moment or scene, especially during or immediately after a film’s joyous conclusion. … During cinematic elevation, viewers observe a character who is using his or her strengths and virtues, and depending on the viewer’s projections and values, feel those sensations of inspiration and subsequently decide to take action for their own greater good or for others or society.” (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008, pp. 8, 9)

In order to enhance the Positive Cinema Therapy experience for their clients, clinicians can teach them to view a movie with conscious awareness. Clients learn to become calm and centered before they start watching the film. They are instructed to pay attention to the story and to themselves. They need to observe how the movie’s images, ideas, conversations, and characters affect their physical sensations. What happens when a scene throws them off balance because it triggers undesired emotions? Another entryway into conscious awareness is to observe how the movie images, ideas, conversations, and characters affect the clients’ breath. They notice its shallowness or fullness, its speed and quality. They do not try to change or control it. They do not analyze anything while they are watching, but are fully present with their experience. (Wolz, 2005)
Criteria for Choosing Movies

Although every film genre can potentially produce a movie displaying virtues and strengths, certain genres tend to be more conducive than others to produce a film that is useful for Positive Cinema Therapy. Since drama is the most diverse category and frequently most similar to a Heroes Journey, dramatic movies generally offer the best opportunity for different virtues and strengths to evolve. (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008)

Character strengths are portrayed in numerous films. The most common positive psychology strengths found in movies are creativity, bravery, persistence, hope, humor, and love. These strengths lend themselves nicely to a visual modality like film. Other strengths like humility, prudence, self-regulation, and love of learning are less often depicted in movies. (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008)

Many films portray a character displaying more than one positive psychology strength or virtue. In order to model a certain strength for a client, a movie character needs to be chosen who displays this strength as a dominant strength. The dominant strength accentuates or maintains other strengths in the character. Otherwise, the therapist needs to ask clients to focus on the particular strengths that they are trying to develop and build upon.

Niemiec (2007) suggests the following features for movies that help develop a certain virtue or strength:

“1. balanced portrayal of a character displaying at least one of the 24 strengths categorized by Peterson & Seligman (2004);
2. depiction of obstacles and/or the struggle or conflict the character faces in reaching or maximizing strength;
3. a character portrayal that illustrates how to overcome obstacles and/or build and maintain the strength; and a tone or mood in the film that is inspiring and uplifting.”
(Niemiec & Wedding, 2008, p. 7)

These criteria can apply to a movie character and to the film as a whole. Some films do not meet all four criteria, and may still be useful positive cinema films if clients feel moved by their viewing experience and recognize virtues and/or strengths in characters.

Some movies can be inappropriate because they are too overtly Pollyannaish. In
fact, films that are effective in Positive Cinema Therapy are not necessarily lighthearted. (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008) “They can be dark, intense, and potentially upsetting or graphic as they drive home important issues of the struggle of human suffering, and the painful acceptance of reality. ‘Darker’ films such as House of Sand and Fog (2003) and The Hours (2002) are good examples of somber films with positive psychology themes.” (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008, p. 10)

Films that emphasize the antithesis of strength can be useful to help clients learn “by proxy” how not to do something or not to behave in pursuit of a certain goal. “Positive psychologists know that negative emotions and unpleasant experiences do matter, and it is the integration of the pleasant and the unpleasant, the dark and the light, the comic and the tragic that allows us to map the ingredients for improving the human condition. These ‘shadow or ‘dark’ side films can teach us a great deal about positive psychology strength by portraying the antithesis of the virtue or strength being considered. For example, films about impulse control teach us about the strength of self-regulation. Films about narcissists tell us something about the strengths humility and modesty. Pessimistic characters illustrate the importance of hope and optimism; from the angry and resentful we learn about challenges of forgiveness and mercy.”
(Niemiec & Wedding, 2008, p. 10)

References are available in Article #3 of this online course