



## EDITORIAL: Regional News in Positive Psychology

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In the years since the introduction of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the need for greater positivity in workplaces, communities, and educational institutions has increasingly been recognized as fundamental to the deployment of human growth and excellence (Allen & McCarthy, 2016; Linley, Harrington, & Garcea, 2013; Oades, Robinson, Green, & Spence, 2011; Schueller, 2009; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). This growing need has in turn been met by a proliferation of programs, national and organizational policies, community initiatives, and research activity around the world. The Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region has been part of this same growth (Lambert, Pasha-Zaidi, Passmore, & York Al-Karam, 2015; Rao, Donaldson, & Doiron, 2015); indeed, the best part of being editor (Lambert) of the journal is that I hear about interesting developments and meet the people behind them too.

Yet, many good initiatives never see the light of day as they do not fit neatly under the category of empirical science, so beloved by academics and researchers. Being a psychologist and researcher, I have always felt a disconnect between these two realms; researchers are worried about p-values and statistics, and often criticized for not being concerned enough about real life or producing knowledge that is relevant to the average person. Practitioners, on the other hand, are more focused on people, their views and how they feel, but also criticized in turn for not always being mindful of the need to critically evaluate and situate their work. Yet, to advance the field of positive psychology, we will need greater cooperation between these two camps as well as the input of (positive) psychology students, community leaders and visionaries, industry, education, healthcare, policy makers, and the average person on the street, to share ideas, initiatives, plans, and hopes for a brighter future. To begin envisioning what a positive psychology would look like in the MENA region, we take the liberty of populating the field and highlighting developments that are underway. Yet, we readily acknowledge that because the field is new, efforts often occur in isolation and are not currently unified under one research agenda, or connected to a professional body, we will certainly have missed many. Consequently, this editorial serves as a call for greater



collaboration between members of the positive psychology community so that together, we can develop a relevant, applicable, and culturally responsive positive psychology agenda for the region.

### **The United Arab Emirates Minister of Happiness: Her Excellency Ohood Al Roumi**

In recent years, the UAE government has worked towards establishing a national program for happiness and wellbeing. Part of this program is the strategic implementation of positive practice in sectors such as education, healthcare and in government ministries. Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum has stated that the government's mission is to promote positivity by implementing policies, programmes and services that contribute towards the development of a positive and happy community (UAE Cabinet, 2016a), with the main tasks of ensuring that conditions are favourable for the delivery of happiness to individuals, families and employees by promoting positivity as a value in the community (Emirates News Agency (WAM), 2016).

Realizing this mission from February 2016 is the responsibility of the newly appointed Minister of Happiness, Her Excellency Ohood Al Roumi, charged with establishing the happiness, satisfaction and positivity of citizens as a national priority. A federal budget of 49AED billion has been allocated for 2016 alone which has, in part, enabled the Minister to work with more than fifty government entities in the national program for happiness (Remeithi, 2016).

The National program of Happiness features a set of three initiatives;

1. Happiness in policies, programmes and services of all government entities and work environments;
2. Promotion of values of positivity and happiness as a lifestyle in the UAE community
3. Development of innovative benchmarks and mechanisms for measuring happiness in the community ("Mohammed bin Rashid", 2016).

"Our aim is to make happiness a lifestyle in the UAE community as well as the noble goal and supreme objective of the government," said Sheikh Mohammad (Emirates News Agency (WAM), 2016), underscoring the importance of creating a positive environment and instilling values of positivity in ministries and government employees. Sheikh Mohamed has emphasised that policies, programmes, services and work environment in ministries should focus on happiness and enhance coordination with the private sector to achieve this target. He further acknowledged the need for accurately measuring happiness among members of the community.

The Minister of State for Happiness addressed the ruler's aim by initiating a charter for happiness and positivity which will be unveiled along with key performance indices (Emirates News Agency (WAM), 2016). Part of this initiative is the commencement of a year-long training program, the first of its kind on a national level, for 60 Chief Happiness and Positivity Officers who will ensure the program's success (Arabian Business, 2016). These Officers will serve in councils established by the Minister of Happiness in every other ministry and led by the respective minister. The goal is to bring the ministries' initiatives in line with the government's happiness objectives. Her Excellency Ohood Al Roumi stated that the role of the Ministry of State was to assess the effects of these initiatives on citizen and resident satisfaction levels (Gulf Today, 2016).



Initiatives within government have already begun including the creation of Happiness Centers, the Smart Dubai Happiness Agenda, awards for positivity among government staff and the “#100days of happiness” campaign. Customer service centres have been restructured around the Minister’s aims and renamed customer service staff to customer happiness staff (UAE Cabinet, 2016b). Their focus continues to be the offer of good service, as well as getting to the core of service; understanding what makes customers happy. To motivate staff, the Minister is introducing a ‘Happiness and Positivity Happiness Heroes Medal’, recognition for frontline staff whose positivity and happiness make them exceptional.

Another initiative is the Smart Dubai Office’s implementation of its ‘Happiness Agenda’ which supports Dubai’s transformation into a smart city through a science-based approach that puts the public’s happiness as its main priority. The approach allows people to access services in easy, efficient, and convenient ways and helps them achieve a sense of well-being and satisfaction in life (Smart Dubai, 2016). To achieve happiness at a city-wide level, the Happiness Agenda proposes to set forth a series of programs designed to “discover, influence and satisfy individuals’ affective, basic, cognitive and deeper needs — the essential ingredients for happiness” (Smart Dubai, 2016).

Additionally, strategic focus has been placed on the importance of encouraging a positive educational environment by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), responsible for private education in Dubai. The KHDA has recognized that positive education can improve educational practice and transform children’s hearts (KHDA, 2016a) and near the end of 2016 the Minister of Happiness partnered with the KHDA to launch the ‘#100DaysOfPositivity’ initiative (KHDA, 2016b). It was designed jointly by the National Programme for Happiness and Positivity and the KHDA in Dubai, with the aim of supporting school practices that encourage children to lead happier lives and increase positive habits. The initiative is aligned with initiative two of the National Program of Happiness in relying on the community’s cooperation to integrate positive daily behaviors (The National, 2016). Dr. Abdulla Al Karam, Director General of the KHDA stated that the #100DaysOfPositivity initiative brings together the positive practices that are being lived Dubai on a daily basis (The National, 2016).

Finally, under the Happiness Charter, Her Excellency Al Roumi unveiled a Customer Happiness Formula and Youth Index to provide effective measurement tools for government employees to achieve happiness goals (Khaleej Times, 2016; UAE Cabinet, 2016b). The Minister states that the Customer Happiness Formula is a comprehensive initiative aiming to develop government services and build effective relationships between government employees and their customers by measuring levels of customer happiness and monitoring the program’s success (UAE Cabinet, 2016b). In addition, the creation of the Youth Index comes as a result of the UAE being committed to investing in its youth as a key driver in the development and empowerment of the nation. Its goal will be to facilitate and measure the needs and opportunities for participation of youth on national and global agendas. Wellbeing data such as education, traditional cultural values and media consumption habits are also of interest and this data will be used to assess levels of youth wellbeing and be used to create strategies for youth development (Khaleej Times, 2016).

Through these initiatives, the government and Minister of Happiness have adopted the visions and directives of His Highness and are turning these into a reality. Since its inception in



February 2016, the Minister of Happiness has accomplished the near impossible by putting a policy framework in place and implementing the first steps of major government initiatives in less than a year. We wait with anticipation for the slate of new developments in place for 2017.

### **The Alnowair Initiative:**

#### **Interview with Sheikha Intisar Al Sabah, Executive Director and Founder of Alnowair**

*Tell us about Alnowair and what you do in Kuwait.* Alnowair is a socially progressive initiative that targets Kuwaiti youth and aims to spread positivity through various activities, campaigns, and conferences that rely on scientific research conducted by institutions such as Harvard and Berkeley, and leading experts in the field of positive psychology. We started Alnowair on March 20<sup>th</sup> 2013 in conjunction with the first International Day of Happiness launched by the United Nations to inspire 100 million people around the world towards greater happiness.

*What motivated you to introduce and nurture positivity in Kuwait?* In 2012, I came across a video. A young man posted a song on YouTube that showed images of a country I hardly recognized as my own. As the images of trash and traffic flashed on my screen, tears welled up in my eyes. I thought, “Why is he bashing my beautiful Kuwait? Kuwait doesn’t deserve this.” So, I actually contacted him and asked him why he would do such a thing? He said that it was the truth and he thought by bashing it, he could make it better. The idea of “Alnowair” came to me a week later when I read an article on CNN’s website by Shawn Achor, a pioneer in the field of positive psychology. The article spoke about how, as human beings, our mindset, either positive or negative, determines how we view the world, situations and everyday events. As I read more, I realized it was up to me to do something... At first, it was hard to get people to understand that positivity was not the opposite of reality. It took work to get that misconception to go away. Now, we have people understanding why they should and can be positive to acquire a better life that is still based in reality, just a more fulfilling version of it. We get a lot of feedback at every event and see the effects of our campaigns on the faces of people who join us. We get many messages on our social media platforms that have more than 21,000 followers and receive numerous emails from the weekly newsletters we send to more than 1100 subscribers.

*What initiatives have you done to date?* At Alnowair, we target youth in particular and attract them with a fresh, interactive approach. Consequently, we work in shopping malls, parking lots, online, in classrooms and at many public events and that is what makes us different. Over the years and still now, we have a weekly mail-out with tips on positivity. We also hold movie nights with feel-good themes, summer camps, carnivals, professional conferences, kindness and gratitude campaigns across the country, and yellow car parades for kinder, safer and more cooperative driving as a nation where we had the support of several automobile merchants, the Ministry of Education, and Traffic Department of Kuwait. Apart from photography competitions, we had 30 yellow benches installed facing the sea or other beautiful areas to remind people to look for the beauty in Kuwait. Two other greatly received events were the “Let’s not Phub” campaign that promoted being attentive to the people you are with – versus those on your phone- and “On the



Yellow side”, that was about turning negatives into positives. We even had mindfulness pods set up in the mall to help people calm themselves and reprioritize positivity.

In all our events, we have the support of various ministries, universities, schools, and high profile business organizations who want to share and create greater positivity in the country. What is perhaps most valuable to us though is our core of youth volunteers who also organize flash mobs, street theater, and mock street experiments to get average Kuwaiti citizens and the expatriates who live among us attuned to our message and participating with us. As far as we can tell, we are certainly the only organization of this kind in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and very likely the whole of the Middle East. Our strength is that we are not academics; we don’t just think and write but we actually “do”; we take the science of happiness and translate this into understandable action so that everyone can enjoy a better, more hopeful and productive life.

For this year specifically, we hope to achieve two major goals by implementing our university and organizational programs, both designed by a positive psychologist in the region. We have been granted permission from the Ministry Of Education to enter 23 schools and have already enlisted and are training ten retired head educators, all of whom are passionate about becoming head trainers who, once they pass our initial preparation and screening program, will be instrumental in passing what they have learned to school teachers who will implement the exercises with their students. We are also working with Kuwait University to publish a paper on these programs. Our aim is to be a catalyst in the transformation of Kuwait to becoming a more positive and dynamic country, a transformation that not only benefits our country, but for our neighbors as well as we know that good practices are always emulated within the GCC.

### Regional Practitioners

Jordanian Mohammed Al-Haj Baddar, an International Positive Education Network (IPEN) global representative and International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) associate, is a positive psychology practitioner, program developer, and author has been putting positive psychology to good use and towards humanitarian aims. He recently developed and implemented a positive psychology program for a group of 24 female Syrian adolescent refugees living in Mafrq (Al-Haj Baddar & Al-Salahat, forthcoming). Initial results from this pilot program showed that resilience, hardiness, resourcefulness, optimism and the ability to deal with negative emotions like death and hopelessness were successfully targeted through interventions modeled on the PERMA (Seligman, 2011) pathways. His work is an example of how positive psychology can be used to deal with issues that can benefit from positive psychological attention and we hope his work will encourage more applications, and where it really matters, in the real world. Mohammed further conducts regional training programs on positive change and educational leadership; he is also writing an Arabic-language practice guide in positive psychology to spread the message of positivity across the region. Connect with him at his new initiative called نفسي الإيجابية in Arabic (FB).

In Jordan too, is Mohammad Asfour, Master’s degree in Positive Leadership, who also took to social media to spread positivity with his initiative called أهل البلد Ahel Al Balad (FB) and is working hard to spread knowledge about the field as well as the skills for greater positivity and social capital across community collaboration and events. Finally, Amani Attili (Jordan), educator



and educational consultant and trainer, is greatly interested in character education and values. She is the project manager and coordinator of a program called Labeeb's Friends, designed to develop social and emotional skills for kids in elementary schools.

In Oman, Homaira Kabir, a University of East London, School of Psychology, Masters of Science in Applied Positive Psychology graduate, is working as a positive psychology coach for women primarily. She previously worked in the 'other' side of psychology as a cognitive-behavioral therapist with adolescents and can speak to a complete picture of flourishing mental health as a result. She writes regular blogs and articles on various topics in positive psychology and psychology in general, and has contributed to several initiatives in the region. We anticipate a number of positive developments from them all and encourage you to support their efforts.

### Other Developments

For the first time in its three year history, the International Psychology Conference Dubai (IPCD) (October 21-22, 2016) was proud to have received enough positive psychology abstracts to warrant its own dedicated conference topic stream. Individual sessions were offered on positive psychology interventions, mindfulness-based stress reduction, positive organizational strategies, as well as the introduction of a character strengths program recently adopted by the Saudi government to address the development of employment soft skills in youth. An interactive panel was also held to discuss a future positive psychology agenda for the UAE nationally, whereby a number of issues were raised such as who gets to set the agenda in a multicultural nation like the UAE where only 10% of the nation is composed of nationals? Other issues involved the increasing number of happiness consultants offering services outside the therapeutic realm and how positive psychology can be inculcated into education, organizations and further removed fields, like healthcare. Finally, the panel spent much time considering whether "happiness" is even the right aim given that not all cultures, religions, nations (or individuals for that matter) agree on the definition of optimal human functioning.

As noted in our last volume, an analysis of the regional research output in positive psychology totalled 53 studies and is surely higher now (Rao et al., 2015), while a cursory review of ResearchGate.net showed professors in Egypt, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, the UAE, and Lebanon citing positive psychology as one of their main research interests. Further, higher education offerings in positive psychology show that at least two universities in Lebanon (Lebanese American University and American University of Beirut) now offer at least one undergraduate course in the field, while one of the national universities in the UAE is currently putting together an undergraduate minor in positive psychology. While positive psychology is often associated with organizational, clinical or educational realms, it is interesting to see the Bahrain Olympic Committee be involved in positive psychology workshops for its members and reflects how the field is useful across many settings. A number of regional and national LinkedIn groups focused on positive psychology also exist.

While there are a number of successes in the field, there is nonetheless cause for concern; due to its popularity, the commodification of positive psychology has been both a benefit and liability. While generating interest in wellbeing, practise has outstripped the pace of research,





requiring the reinstatement of empirical research as a focus of the field. Further, there remains a need to develop – like all regions in the world – an indigenous positive psychology that reflects local and regional values and perspectives on what makes life meaningful and worth living and which help to understand the factors that lead to conditions of growth, as well as how quality of life is understood, defined, operationalized, and measured. Accordingly, to attract more research and help develop the field, a call for abstracts recently went out for the publication of an edited book that will span the education, clinical, organizational, health, community, and policy areas of positive psychology across the Middle East, and which will begin to spell out a future direction for positive psychology research, policy, and practise. We hope you will submit an abstract by February 1<sup>st</sup> for which the particulars are here: [https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/positive-psychology-middle-east-north-africa-research-lambert-1?trk=pulse\\_spock-articles](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/positive-psychology-middle-east-north-africa-research-lambert-1?trk=pulse_spock-articles)

In sum, it has only been a year since the inauguration of this journal and in that time, we have seen many positive developments in the field suggesting it is defining itself, deepening its roots, and continuing to attract interest on the part of governments, communities and individuals everywhere. We look forward to updating our readers to see what more has transpired in the next few months. In the meanwhile, we hope you enjoy the issue that follows and wish to extend a particularly warm thanks to Miss Dima Yousef (Canadian University Dubai, UAE), Manal Al Ahdab (Dubai, UAE) and Dr. Nausheen Pasha- Zaidi for their translation work, tireless editing, repeated support of the journal, as well as friendship. We couldn't do it without you and the help of our reviewers, as well as authors, who are always keen to contribute to the journal's endeavours – and often at 10pm on a weekend! Finally, we wish all of you dear readers, a brilliant year ahead! May it be filled foremost with love, friendship, small surprises on slow days, and steady growth towards a meaningful life and a more excellent you...

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