



## Views on Wellbeing Research, Policy and Practice: An Interview with Mohammed K. Al-Haj Baddar

Al-Haj Baddar, M. K.

**Citation:** Al-Haj Baddar, M. K. (2017). Views on wellbeing research, policy and practice: An interview with Mohammed Al-Haj Baddar. *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3(1), 7-11.

**Abstract:** In this volume of the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology, we explore the views, hopes, and current research agendas of those working to advance knowledge in the field of positive psychology within the MENA region, or who research aspects of culture and religion relevant to it. We uncover their thoughts on the current status of knowledge as well as what opportunities and pitfalls exist. Here, we discuss with Jordanian Mohammed Al-Haj Baddar, his work in positive education and the development of positive psychosocial support groups for refugees.

ملخص: في هذا المجلد من مجلة الشرق الأوسط لعلم النفس الإيجابي، نستكشف وجهات النظر والأمال، والأجندات البحثية الحالية لأولئك الذين يعملون على النهوض بالمعرفة في مجال علم النفس الإيجابي في منطقة الشرق الأوسط، أو الذين يبحثون جوانب الثقافة والدين ذات الصلة به. نكتشف أفكارهم حول الوضع الحالي للمعرفة وكذلك عن الفرص والصعوبات الموجودة. هنا، نناقش مع الأردني محمد الحاج ، عمله في التعليم الإيجابي وتطوير مجموعات الدعم النفسي والاجتماعي للاجئين.

**Keywords:** positive psychology; well-being; positive education; refugees; Jordan; social media

**About the Author:** Mohammed K. Al-Haj Baddar, an International Positive Education Network (IPEN) global representative and International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) associate, holds a Master's degree in educational psychology from Al Balqaa University, Jordan. As a positive psychology specialist at the Jannati Clinic, Jordan, he facilitates positive psychology interventions to groups, individuals, and schools. The appreciation of beauty and excellence and a love of learning are his top strengths and these led him to take dozens of online courses on psychology and positive psychology since 2013. In the past year, in collaboration with CARE International, he conducted seven positive psychosocial support programs with 22 Syrian refugee groups in Mafraq and Azraq. He is currently writing an Arabic-language practice guide in positive psychology to spread the message of positivity called نفسي الإيجابية (My Positive Psych).

**Address correspondence to:** Mohammed Kamal Al-Haj Baddar, E-mail: [moh.baddar@gmail.com](mailto:moh.baddar@gmail.com).

**MEJPP:** You've caught the attention of researchers and practitioners in the region and abroad for your positive psychology work in Jordan. What is it that you do and with what impact?

**MKAB:** The principle of "act locally" made me think of integrating positive psychology in what I do and observe how it can be effective in Jordan, where I got the chance with CARE International to conduct seven psychosocial support programs for several groups of adolescents and adults that ranged from Syrian refugees to local Jordanian community members. CARE



International is a humanitarian organization that works around the globe to save lives, defeat poverty and achieve social justice. Its primary work is protection and it aims to enhance the resilience of populations impacted by regional conflict. I decided to develop a positive psychology based psychosocial support program to build the level of resilience amongst the participants based in Mafraq and Azraq, Jordan where large communities of Syrian refugees are based in the northern and eastern part of Jordan. These participants were from disenfranchised areas, often unemployed, and lacking in coping techniques in the wake of hardship. It was determined that these groups needed extra community supports.

To meet this aim, I developed a program of 8 to 10 sessions based on three main ideas; namely, Zimbardo's (Bonniwell & Zimbardo, 2004) time perspective theory so participants can work on having a balanced time perspective and have adaptive orientations to savor the positive and cope with the negative whether in the past, present, or future. This means for example although the Syrian participants can see their past-negative traumatic situations as they fled from Syria, they firstly can see the learning outcome as they become frustration tolerant, and secondly, how to get the best of their potential developed in the past positive. Learning this technique can be a positive alternative to living too much in the past or future (with a negative lens) and not enough in the present (with a positive lens), in effect reducing the effects of temporal bias that limit the ability of individuals to function optimally.

The other component involves the 24 well-known character strengths, like persistence, courage, integrity, forgiveness, and open-minded as examples, illustrated in the Character Strengths and Values Inventory (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). I also explore Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, which suggests that wellbeing can be attained through the five pathways of positive emotion, engagement, attention to relationships, meaning and achievements. For positive emotions, many techniques are done based on Fredrickson's (2013a) "Broaden and Build Theory." For engagement, many techniques are taken from Kabat-Zinn's (1990) mindfulness, Bryant and Veroff's (2007) savoring, and flow theory (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). I also focus on love and kindness for relationships (Fredrickson, 2013b). Meaning and purpose for me are always related to usefulness and I refer to Steger, Kashdan and Oishi's (2008) work. Finally, accomplishment is the cherry on the cake top where I love to use Oettingen's (2014) Wish-Outcome-Obstacles-Plan (WOOP) technique where wishes are becoming reality.

Learning about these models and partaking in activities designed to help participants embed such practises across their daily lives can improve resilience. This has been determined by evaluation studies of the program based on pre and post interview topics inspired by previous research (Alsheikh Ali, 2014; Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007; Connor & Davidson, 2003). These interviews also revealed that participants are becoming closer to people around them, using their character strengths in their everyday life, and are also more grateful, optimistic, and fulfilled. CARE International in particular was pleased that participants were able to function better in different life contexts as mothers at home, students at school, or workers at work.

As a result of these successes, I am seeking cooperation with a partner to rigorously pursue what the effectiveness of such a positive program can be in not only increasing resilience, but strengthening social inclusion and entrepreneurship as well as decreasing depression and anxiety



amongst Syrian refugees. Frankly speaking, I need an organization that can offer logistics, support, and facilities for me in order to do such rigorous research.

**MEJPP:** You have also been doing a lot of positive psychology work with schools and youth in Amman (Jordan). Tell us about that.

**MKAB:** I was wondering as a trainer how a positive psychology program would affect the attitudes of school administrators, counselors, and teachers and I had a chance to determine this question across two private educational institutions in Amman. I undertook a training program, and explored the same components (balanced time perspective, character strengths, and PERMA). The informal feedback showed that participants had a more positive attitude towards not only the students, but the school itself and were more motivated to give from their time and effort. I would like to follow this up with a more developed program focusing on improving teacher motivation and making administrative leadership more positive so that the organizational culture within the school can improve as well. For this, I am hoping to connect the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania to the Jordanian Ministry of Education so they can come up with additional research ideas about the impact of positive education on educational policies and practices at the national level.

**MEJPP:** At last, you are also doing private clinical work in positive psychology which is open to the entire community. What does this entail?

**MKAB:** I am curious as to how a positive psychology online action and a positive psychology practice guide affect public awareness in the Arab region. I have found that each Facebook positive awareness post reaches an average of 1100 persons, is liked by 24, and has been commented on and shared by at least one. I will continue with such posts to engage and educate as many people as possible. Also, as a positive psychology specialist at the Jannati Clinic in Amman, I've done three free sessions so far with about 70 people in attendance for each, with the majority being Jordanian and the rest from other Arabic countries. In these sessions, I talk about emotional regulation, positive emotions, and positive change. I chose these topics because of their relevance to our society as I can see how a negative emotion like anger, erred thought/ generalization, or bad habits can lead to negative results. Also, this kind of awareness action might be important for being tolerant, dealing with stress, treating refugees, overcoming depression, and overcoming financial troubles. I expect this to grow over time and hope to be able to offer courses dealing with workers, parents, and social activists in the future also. As part of this work around educating people and making them aware of the power of positive psychology, I am also working on an Arabic practice guide entitled نفسي الإيجابية (My Positive Psych) that will hopefully be published in 2018. So, watch for it and find us on Jannati Clinic's Facebook page under the name "positivity at a glance!"

**MEJPP:** Let's take a look at the broader positive psychology movement and research landscape in the region, what research questions are not being asked that should be?

**MKAB:** I would like to see more seriously the correlation between positivity and Arabic-Muslim culture values like religiosity for instance. For example, research in Muslim communities have found that religiosity is positively correlated with positive psychology variables (Abdel-Khalek, 2010; 2017); and negatively correlated with depressive symptoms (Thomas, Mutawa, Furber, & Grey, 2016). Investigation into areas of overlap between positive psychology and Arabic-Muslim



culture is needed. These questions may give existing positive psychology principles and techniques an Arabic-Muslim flavor that make the field and its concepts easier to understand and use, and encourage greater applications and integrations at home, school, and work. I'd also like to see more research done on the character strengths of curiosity, perseverance, self-regulation, and the appreciation of beauty and excellence for instance among students in different age groups, employees in varied industries, and within families too. As character strengths can be developed, improved, and applied in different life contexts, these make interesting topics to study and can form the basis of many programs to build individual and group potential.

Experimental studies that test positive intervention effectiveness are necessary to validate the use of such tools in our regional context. In terms of mental health, revealing the impact of positive psychotherapy (PPT; Rashid, 2015; Rashid, Howes, & Loudon, 2017) on increasing well-being and resilience and/or decreasing psychological disorders amongst different kinds of groups can contribute to helping people not only survive in the wake of distress but also thrive and be able to savor the good as well as cope with the bad. This is important in the region where there are many areas of conflict that impact people greatly. Another question that deserves attention is the impact of positive interventions on productivity and production, creativity and innovation, and other important business variables in a workplace context.

Finally, a topic that is popular right now and timely for the region to explore, given its high numbers of youth, is positive education. In 2017, a report entitled, "The State of Positive Education" (Bott et al., 2017) was produced for the World Government Summit in cooperation with the International Positive Education Network (IPEN), in which schools were promoted as places where students not only cultivated academic skills, but also developed their character strengths and competencies which together supported their well-being. The report also made clear that to maintain its scientific rigor in education the field needed greater intersection between research and practice to determine best practice regional guidelines. My hope is that Arab countries can work on answering such questions and begin to consider, as has been done in other parts of the world (Adler, 2015), that well-being can be taught at a large scale in schools and improve academic performance, as well as well-being for the region's youth.

#### References

- Abdel-Khalek, A. M. (2010). Quality of life, subjective well-being, and religiosity in Muslim college students. *Quality of Life Research, 19*, 1133-1143.
- Abdel-Khalek, A. M. (2017). The construction and validation of the Arabic Scale of Intrinsic Religiosity (ASIR). *Psychology and Behavioral Science, 4*(4), doi:10.19080/PBSIJ.2017.04.555644
- Adler, A. (2015). Gross national happiness and positive education in Bhutan. Retrieved from <http://www.ipositive-education.net/gross-national-happiness-and-positive-education-in-bhutan/>
- Alsheikh Ali, A. (2014). Resilience levels and their relationship to academic adjustment and achievement among graduates of orphanages. *Jordan Journal of Educational Sciences, 10*(4), 411-430. Retrieved from <http://journals.yu.edu.jo/jjes/Issues/Vol10No4.html>



- Boniwell, I., & Zimbardo, P. G. (2004). Balancing time perspective in pursuit of optimal functioning. In P. A. Linley & S. Joseph (Eds.), *Positive psychology in practice* (pp. 165-178). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Bott, D., Escamilla, H., Kaufman, S. B., Kern, M. L., Krekel, C., Schlicht-Schmälzle, R., ... Larson, E. E. (Ed.) (2017). *The state of positive education*. World Government Summit/International Positive Education Network. Retrieved from <https://www.worldgovernmentsummit.org/knowledge-hub>
- Bryant, F. B. & Veroff, J. (2007). *Savoring: A new model of positive experience*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Campbell-Sills, L., & Stein, M. B. (2007). Psychometric analysis and refinement of the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC): Validation of a 10-Item measure of resilience. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 20*(6), 1019-1028.
- Connor, K. M., & Davidson, J. R. (2003). Development of a new resilience scale: The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC). *Depression and Anxiety, 18*(2), 76-82.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2013a). Positive emotions broaden and build. In E. A. Plant & P. G. Devine (Eds.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (pp. 47-53). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2013b). *Love 2.0: How our supreme emotion affects everything we feel, think, do, and become*. New York, NY: Hudson Street Press.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness*. New York, NY: Dell.
- Nakamura, J., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2009). Flow theory and research. In S. J. Lopez, & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (pp. 195-206). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Oettingen, G. (2014). *Rethinking positive thinking: Inside the new science of motivation*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Rashid, T. (2015). Positive psychotherapy: A strength-based approach. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 10*, 25-40.
- Rashid, T., Howes, R., & Loudon, R. (2017). Positive psychotherapy. In M. Slad, L. Oades, & A. Jarden (Eds.), *Wellbeing, recovery and mental health* (pp. 112-132). Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Steger, M. F., Kashdan, T. B., & Oishi, S., (2008). Being good by doing good: Eudaimonic activity and daily well-being correlates, mediators, and temporal relations. *Journal of Research in Personality, 42*, 22-42.
- Thomas, J., Mutawa, M., Furber, S. W., & Grey, I. (2016). Religiosity: Reducing depressive symptoms amongst Muslim females in the United Arab Emirates. *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology, 2*(1), 9-21.