



## Conference Proceeding: Continuing the Work of Developing a Regional Positive Psychology

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**Abstract:** The move towards greater global wellbeing is growing at a rapid pace and shows no signs of slowing down, especially in the region, where it has taken full steam. This move has witnessed the development of two research centers in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. These developments are not only promising for the continued development of regional wellbeing research from which we can learn about the contributing factors to a life well lived; they inspire the development of a psychology that incorporates aspects of culture and religion, as well as issues of national development. Work in policy development, commercial sector wellbeing initiatives, as well as education and community projects have also emerged. In this panel, we explore those projects and discuss where the field is heading, what needs to be done, and which challenges and opportunities present themselves. The announcement of the Middle East Psychological Association's (MEPA) first division was also announced, namely Division #1 Positive Psychology.

ملخص البحث : يتسارع الدفع باتجاه تحقيق المزيد من الحياة الطيبة بوتيرة حثيثة لا تتباطأ، خاصة في المنطقة حيث تؤخذ الفكرة بحماس تام. شهدت حركة تحقيق الحياة الطيبة تطوير مركزين للبحوث في المملكة العربية السعودية والإمارات العربية المتحدة. وبالإمكان استشفاف العوامل المساهمة في الحياة الطيبة عبر هذه التطورات التي ليست مبشرة باستمرارية تقدم الأبحاث في مجال الحياة الطيبة في المنطقة فحسب، بل تحت على مزيد من الأبحاث المتعلقة بعلم النفس المنطوي على قضايا الثقافة والأديان والتنمية الوطنية. وظهرت مبادرات ومشاريع لتحسين جودة الحياة في مجالات وضع السياسات والقطاعات التجارية والتربية والتعليم والمجتمع. وفي هذا الصدد، نقوم باختبار هذه المشاريع والمبادرات لتقصي مسار مجال الحياة الطيبة ومعرفة الواجب عمله وإلقاء الضوء على التحديات والفرص البَيِّنَة. هذا وأعلن عن تأسيس جمعية الشرق الأوسط لعلم النفس بقسمها الأول المسمى بـ "القسم 1: علم النفس الإيجابي".

**Keywords:** positive psychology; governance; education; culture; religion; academia; research; measurement; Middle East/North Africa (MENA)

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**A number of developments** have occurred in the Middle East/North African region since the call for greater wellbeing was made by governments, institutions, non-profits and organizations alike. In this 1.5 hour panel, introductions and a number of themes were uncovered and discussed. Each panelist's biography is included and a summary of their main ideas. A special announcement capped the event.

**Dr. Louise Lambert** is a Canadian psychologist, consultant, professor and positive psychology researcher. She has lived in the UAE for 10 years and is now working with the Emirates Center for Happiness Research in Al Ain's UAEU. She has several established evidence-based positive psychology intervention programs in healthcare, the workplace and educational settings across Canada, the UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Dr. Louise is the founder and Editor-in-Chief of the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology, a journal dedicated to uncovering human excellence in the region. She initiated the panel to highlight regional developments in a variety of fields.

**Sheikha Intisar Al Sabah**, is the Director of AlNowair, a Kuwaiti non-profit dedicated to positivity in the nation. Drawing on positive psychology principles, Alnowair is the Middle East's first and only permanent initiative creating positive social behavioral change through educational, workplace and community-based programs and campaigns. Among other programs, their starship educational "Bareec" program has now reached 37 schools, over 300 school teachers and university professors, and had a positive impact on over 8000 students. Sheikha Intisar was recognized as the Arab Woman of the Year in 2017 for her contribution to community development and Alnowair received the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) 2014 Award for its contribution to youth development.

"For us, positivity is a skill, mindset, and quality that everyone needs, but youth in particular need these skillsets to be able to flourish and excel and take our country to the next level. The Bareec program was a tremendous success; our results were published (Lambert, Passmore, Al-Sabah, Hussain, & Scull, 2018) in an academic journal and received much positive press. Our results showed that both high school and university students improved their wellbeing relative to control groups not participating in the program over a three-month period. Now, we want to expand this program into elementary and middle schools across the country as well. More importantly, the attention received from the Ministry of Education in Kuwait was very positive. In fact, they asked us to cooperate with them on this program to complement the government's development plans, New Kuwait - Vision 2035. For us, we believe that it is possible to teach positivity and we are committed to doing so. Apart from the published results of this program, we also noticed that students became more grateful, less demanding as well as less self-focused; they became more committed to their schools and the learning process overall, showing stronger bonds



with school community and family members. Teachers also expressed greater satisfaction at work and parents also noticed a positive change.”

**Aziz Mulay-Shah**, Managing Director of the Happiness and Wellbeing Certification Scheme, GCA, Dubai, UAE. Now a retired Canadian diplomat, Aziz has expertise in government relations and international affairs, as well as education and positive psychology, having recently authored a chapter in commercial life’s contributions to national wellbeing and co-authored another on the development of national wellbeing policies (Lambert, Mulay-Shah, Warren, & Younis, 2019; Mulay-Shah, Younis, Wood, & Lambert, 2019). He is the Managing Director of Global Communications Agency (GCA), a wellbeing policy and practise advisory firm, specialising in commercial happiness audits across the UAE, GCC region, and beyond. Aziz is a leader in the development of wellbeing policy prescriptions for governments, as well as organizations. GCA also develops social impact investment strategies as a component of Corporate Social Responsibility projects for clients in the Gulf, MENASA region, and Canada.

“For me, what remains the most important aspect of wellbeing is its measurement. Its content is being taken care of by researchers and scientists both regionally and across the globe; but, how it is operationalized, assessed and then turned into policy is the ultimate question. Many initiatives, while extremely positive and impactful, remain initiatives. To truly effect change, the spirit and practise of these initiatives needs to be translated into broader policy guidelines and structures from which governments, as well as organizations, can as a matter of routine activity, develop and build wellbeing into all that is done across society, whether that is education, health, commercial activity, urban development, or even defense for that matter. As the saying goes, what gets measured gets attention.”

**Dr. Saddiga Jaber Al-Ghalib, PhD.**, is Assistant Professor at the Psychology department at Effat University (Saudi Arabia) and the founder of the Positive Psychology and Wellbeing Research Lab. She formerly served at Effat University as the first Dean of Graduate Studies and Scientific Research, Director of the Research and Consultancy Institute, Director of the Center of Excellence in Teaching and Learning and Chair of the Psychology Department. She is an experienced instructor, data analyst and statistical consultant. She has attended conferences and forums all over the world, both as a speaker and guest. She is a life-long learner, always finding new ways to bring healing to people and making life both easier and funner.

“At Effat University in Jeddah, I have been teaching positive psychology for several years now, and most recently, founded the lab. Myself, I was struggling some years back and had learned positive psychology interventions in the West, but back in Saudi Arabia, I wanted to include my religious beliefs as well. I became interested in how science and religion co-exist and these questions became the foundation for the eventual research projects undertaken in the lab, notably the Mindful Jeddah project (Al-Ghalib & Salim, 2018). While the research lab was born of this realization, it was not without difficulty. The Mindful Jeddah project for example was called thusly because it was perceived to be part of the “mindfulness” movement, what some perceived to be un-Islamic. The terms we used became very important and we spent much thinking about how our ideas were presented as much as the ideas themselves. Today people understand that mindfulness is an aspect of wellbeing and it is more accepted; still, the inclusion of Islamic precepts goes a long



way to helping people practise greater wellbeing in a way that is consistent with their beliefs and respectful of who they are.

Developing culturally and religiously congruent programming and messaging is a big part of what we do as is developing culturally relevant tools and measures. Developing a baseline for what is normal in Saudi Arabia will allow the field to grow, but also allow people to be well on their own terms. Paying attention to aspects of our society that do not exist elsewhere is also a focus of what we do; for example, we published a study on the impact of the recent lifting of the ban on women driving in the nation (Al-Ghalib, Salim, Al-Khalifah, & Dahlawi, 2018). These research production and dissemination goals also overlap with, and support Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 for the development of a stronger nation, in particular, with relevance to women and youth. Research and coordination of our efforts will help us attain these goals."

**Dr. Zakeya Al Rasbi**, PhD., is the Director of the newly founded Emirates Center for Happiness Research (ECHR) at the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU). She oversees local and international research projects as well as regional collaborations on a wide variety of wellbeing topics. Under her leadership, the ECHR also offers organizational and educational consultation aimed at spreading happiness and wellbeing across the nation. Dr. Zakeya is also instrumental in developing the UAEU as the nation's first Positive University, with several projects underway.

"In the UAE, we've been fortunate to have a Minister of Happiness and Wellbeing at the state level in the UAE, which has helped to put wellbeing on the agenda both nationally and across institutions and organizations, as well as provide leadership on the issue. But, where we need continued work is in raising awareness about happiness and wellbeing and what it is, as well as what it is not. To that effect, and in collaboration with the Minister and the university, we opened the Center about two years ago. There, we too, have been focused on developing research to understand our own societies, the dynamics of which are not like the West. We have been working with many partners in various institutions, like Melbourne University on a number of school projects. We have a very young, growing population that is not used to being asked for how they feel, what they want, who they are and what their goals are. Yet, youth are receptive to these questions and ideas. In fact, we started a happiness and wellbeing course this year for all students in our own university helping to spread the idea of wellbeing, its theories, concepts and interventions. This has been well received."

Several questions from the audience were taken. Notably, a member of the audience from Lebanon expressed confusion, stating, "While the UAE has a Minister of Happiness, what good would such a minister do in a country like Lebanon where we have constant strikes, mountains of garbage, and political chaos?" Both Aziz and Dr. Louise responded that happiness is not about smiley faces, but this was a good example of where wellbeing, the preferred term in the field, includes good governance and fully implicates the role of government. Individuals can do their part, but happiness and wellbeing also rely on the full engagement of the social contract; that is, the relationship between government entities and individual citizens and residents, to emerge.

**MEPA Division #1 Positive Psychology.** To end the event, a special announcement was finally made: the launch of MEPA's first professional division, Division #1 Positive Psychology. Just as the American Psychological Association has practise divisions, MEPA is dedicated to doing



the same, in addition to growing its own country chapters in an effort to grow the field in the region. The Division's Working Council is composed of Dr. Louise Lambert (UAE); Dr. Saddigha Al-Ghalib (Saudi Arabia); Silvia King (UAE); Hajra Hussain (UAE); Dr. Sherif Arafa (UAE) and Milad Hadchiti (Lebanon). The Division is dedicated to providing an organized, supportive, and collaborative platform for researchers, practitioners, academics, and interested individuals to share in all aspects of positive psychology in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region. It offers a mutually beneficial setting in which such professionals and individuals can exchange scientific knowledge, practice information, develop collegial relationships, and meet the needs and opportunities of the MENA region. Still in development, the Division's goals are to promote rigorous scientific positive psychology research that will create a basis of evidence in the MENA region; encourage the growth of positive psychology by defining, maintaining and improving standards of expertise and evidence-based practice; support the dissemination of knowledge by participating and sharing best practices in professional positive psychology events, as well as assisting and participating in professional activities with MEPA; and, create a collaborative space where practitioners, researchers, academics and students can share and engage in topical debate and discussion, work together, and affirm and define their professional identity. See [www.mepa.org](http://www.mepa.org) for more on this Division.

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