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Conference Proceeding:
Laughing for Wellbeing

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Abstract: This presentation sought to introduce laughter exercises as a positive psychology intervention (PPI) to a Middle Eastern audience. It aimed to provide a brief delineation of related concepts (specifically laughter, playfulness and humour) and situate them in the context of positive psychology, mainly through their link to positive emotions and the Broaden and Build theory. Laughter Yoga, a form of laughter exercise based on unconditional laughter, yogic breathing and playfulness, was introduced as an example of a laughter PPI. Limitations of laughter yoga in the context of cultural suitability were discussed, specifically with respect to fear of happiness.

Keywords: positive psychology; positive emotions; laughter; positive psychology interventions; laughter yoga; Middle East; fear of happiness; broaden and build theory

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Judging by the proliferation of smileys as expressions of happiness and wellbeing, one would be forgiven to think that laughter and happiness are the same. However, the relationship between laughter and positive emotions is not straightforward. Apart from different classifications for emotions (e.g. Ekman, 1992; Posner, Russell, & Peterson, 2005; Russell, 1980), there is the question of what constitutes *positive* emotions (e.g. Lazarus, 2003). This question contributed to the call for a second wave of Positive Psychology (Held, 2004; Ivtzan, Lomas, Hefferon, & Worth, 2016) or Positive Psychology 2.0 (Wong, 2011). Laughter faces similar challenges (Ruch & Ekman, 2001). Depending on acoustic and visual differences as well as context (Curran et al., 2018; Ruch & Wagner, 2015), laughter may have different meanings – including negative (e.g. Schadenfreude when laughing at the misfortune of others) – or may be fake (e.g. Neves, Cordeiro, Scott, Castro, & Lima, 2017). Thus, not everybody who laughs and smiles is actually happy (Ruch & Ekman, 2001).

Laughter: Related but different concepts

Laughter plays an important role in social interactions (Scott, Lavan, Chen, & McGettigan, 2014) and carries "a vocal expressive-communicative signal" (Ruch & Ekman, 2001, p. 1). While laughter had already been of interest to Charles Darwin (1872), research on the topic remains fragmented with constructs often not clearly differentiated.

Often used synonymously is the term humour, even though laughter and humour describe different concepts (Ruch, 2008). *Humour* typically involves a cognitive appraisal and finding something funny, which then triggers a smile or laughter. Categorisations include humour styles (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003) or comic styles (Ruch, Wagner, & Heintz, 2018). Positive psychology interventions (PPIs) - defined as "treatment methods or intentional activities that aim to cultivate positive feelings, behaviors, or cognitions" (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009, p. 467) – involving humour positive psychology interventions have been associated with increased positive affect and reduced sense of stress (e.g. Ruch & McGhee, 2014; Tagalidou, Loderer, Distlberger, & Laireiter, 2018). Cultural differences in humour styles have been observed, for example in North American and Lebanese contexts (Kuiper, Kazarian, Sine, & Bassil, 2010), and the development of culturally sensitive humour PPIs is recommended (Hofmann & Ruch, 2019).

In a Lebanese context, another often synonymously used term, playfulness, has been identified as one of six humour components (Kazarian, 2011). However, *playfulness* is another separate construct and can be defined in adults as "an individual differences variable that allows people to frame or reframe everyday situations in a way such that they experience them as entertaining, and/or intellectually stimulating, and/or personally interesting" (Proyer, 2018, p. 5).

The distinction between humour, playfulness and laughter is particularly important in positive psychology (PP) with the character strength of Humour as part of the Values in Action (VIA) character strengths classification taxonomy. In the VIA definition, humour includes playfulness and liking to laugh (Niemiec, 2018; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), even though the description of the character strength focuses on humour, largely without the facets of playfulness and laughter as distinguished above (Proyer & Ruch, 2011).

Types of Laughter

In non-clinical contexts, laughter is typically generated spontaneously or voluntarily (Ruch & Ekman, 2001; Wild, Rodden, Grodd, & Ruch, 2003). Part of *spontaneous* laughter is the Duchenne display that combines the activation of both the zygomatic and orbicularis oculi muscles and translates into what some call a genuine 'smiling with the eyes' (Ekman, Davidson, & Friesen, 1990). It has been linked to underlying positive emotions, personality stability, improved wellbeing and favourable life outcomes (e.g. Harker & Keltner, 2001). This is consistent with the Broaden and Build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) which posits that positive emotions broaden a person's thought-action repertoire and help build personal resources, resulting in an upward spiral of longer-term positive outcomes. Positive emotions have also been associated with "undoing" negative emotions and their negative physiological consequences found in married couples for example (Yuan, McCarthy, Holley, & Levenson, 2010). *Voluntary* laughter in the form of fake or spoken laughter is a controlled action that does not require positive emotions or reference to anything funny (Ruch & Ekman, 2001). Sound patterns and especially facial expressions in voluntary laughter may differ from spontaneous laughter (Lavan, Scott, & McGettigan, 2016). From a PP perspective, the absence of positive emotions raises the question whether fake laughter in a PPI can have similar benefits as spontaneous laughter.

Using Laughter in Positive Psychology

Research suggests that the physical act of laughing can be used to create positive emotions (Dunbar et al., 2012). In such circumstances, even fake laughter could be considered a PPI (2009). One mechanism responsible for the generation of positive affect is the muscular exertion resulting from prolonged exhalation during laughter which triggers the release of endorphins (Dunbar et al., 2012; Wagner, Rehmes, Kohle, & Puta, 2014). Researchers suggest the endorphin surge and associated increased experience of positive affect create the basis for Duchenne laughter and may reduce negative emotions and stress, increase social bonding and lead to others sharing in the act of laughing (Dunbar et al., 2012).

Laughter Yoga as Positive Psychology Intervention

Laughter Yoga (LY) as a form of laughter exercise has been explored to harness this effect. Its most widely known form was developed in 1995 by Dr Madan Kataria, a general practitioner, and his wife Madhuri, a yoga teacher. The key elements are unconditional (i.e. voluntary) laughter, deep breathing as it occurs during normal laughter and in traditional breathing exercises of yoga (Pranayama) as well as playfulness (Kataria, 2018). LY does not require equipment, and its exercises are adaptable to participants' mobility and level of fitness. A typical LY session with healthy individuals consists of a set of LY exercises over approximately 30 minutes with a brief meditation at the end.

Benefits of Laughter Yoga

Various studies have been conducted to explore laughter exercises, and specifically laughter yoga, sometimes in complex health contexts like with dialysis patients (Bennett et al., 2015). A pilot study of healthy individuals found significant improvements in positive emotions while the severity of reported anxiety and stress were reduced (Weinberg, Hammond, & Cummins, 2014). The authors concluded that LY could be an effective PPI for temporary improvements in subjective wellbeing (SWB).

While promising, it should be noted that research into the effectiveness of LY is in its infancy and many studies have limitations, for example through small sample sizes or lack of control groups. Similarly, the studies to date focused on the effects of laughter and did not explore playfulness as a contributing factor. Research suggests that playfulness in itself has the potential to act, for example, as a "lubricant in social situations" or enhance positive emotions (Proyer & Ruch, 2011, p. 11). Playfulness has been linked with several wellbeing benefits (Proyer & Ruch, 2011).

Thus, further research will be necessary to validate and refine the findings on LY and discern the impact of playfulness.

Cultural Considerations when Working with Laughter

While laughter, and specifically LY, appears to be a promising PPI, the person-activity fit (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2012) needs to be considered. This includes the consideration of cultural suitability, especially regarding the elements of playfulness and overt displays of happiness like laughter. Anecdotal evidence of a Middle Eastern proverb that one shouldn't laugh without reason or the discouragement of loud laughter by women in public, for example, illustrate this point. Whether laughter – and possibly also the effect of a laughter PPI – is interpreted as positive or negative is context-dependent (Curran et al., 2018). A study of cross-cultural differences in playfulness in China and German-speaking countries (Pang & Proyer, 2018) indicates that culture needs to be considered in the regional use of playfulness, too.

A second cultural consideration is the concept of *fear of happiness* (Joshanloo, 2013) which is "the belief that happiness may have negative consequences" (Joshanloo et al., 2014, p. 2). This belief finds support in parts of the Middle East region (Joshanloo et al., 2014). Given the public perception that laughter and happiness are the same, a laughter PPI could conceivably reduce wellbeing by increasing the fear of negative things to come if a person engages in this activity. However, a study in the United Arab Emirates found that PPIs reduced the fear of happiness over time when they were combined with education about PP concepts (Lambert, Passmore, & Joshanloo, 2019). Thus, increased understanding of the difference between spontaneous and voluntary laughter might also achieve a reduction in fear of happiness, although research will be needed to establish this link more fully.

Conclusion

Laughter, humour, playfulness and happiness are closely linked, but different concepts, often not clearly delineated in PP research. Overall, this brief review suggests that laughter exercises based on voluntary (i.e. fake) laughter, specifically LY, has the potential to be an effective PPI, for example, to improve positive emotions, reduce negative emotions and increase life satisfaction. A key mechanism to achieve these outcomes could be the physical activity involved in the act of laughing and the endorphin surge triggered by this exercise. The effectiveness is potentially enhanced by secondary effects related to a shift from voluntary to spontaneous laughter. The impact of playfulness in LY studies has so far largely been ignored as well as the cultural suitability of laugher exercises, specifically in the Middle East. While increasing the understanding of this specific PPI may address fear of happiness levels, further research will be required to explore its regional suitability.

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