

Teaching resilience, sense of purpose in schools can prevent depression and improve grades

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Teaching children how to be more resilient along with regular classroom instruction can improve children's outlook on life, curb depression and boost grades, according to a researcher who spoke at the American Psychological Association's convention Saturday.

"In the last 50 years, the U.S. population has seen an increase in their standard of living, such as having more money, owning more homes and cars and living longer. But our sense of meaning, purpose and satisfaction with life have not gone up, they have gone down," said psychologist Martin Seligman, PhD, of the University of Pennsylvania. "This has been especially detrimental to children. Nearly 20 percent of young people experience depression."

The effects can carry over to adulthood and cause early death, more health problems, less satisfaction with jobs and relationships and higher rates of depression, he added.

Speaking at the APA's 117th annual convention, Seligman showed how [teaching](#) resilience, positive emotion, and a sense of purpose in school can protect children against depression, increase their [life satisfaction](#) and improve their learning power.

The researchers looked at two evidence-based programs, the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP) and the Positive Psychology Program (PPP).

The PRP sought to increase students' ability to handle day-to-day stressors and problems that are common for adolescents. This program was designed to prevent depression.

The PRP promotes optimism by teaching [students](#) to think more realistically and flexibly about the problems they encounter. PRP also teaches assertiveness, creative brainstorming, decision-making, relaxation and other coping and problem-solving skills.

Seligman and his co-authors reviewed 19 studies from the past 20 years that used PRP. These included more than 2,000 8- to 15-year-olds. All the studies used adolescents from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and community settings. The group leaders who taught the skill were all from professional backgrounds.

Based on the students' assessments of their own feelings, the researchers found that PRP increased optimism and reduced depressive symptoms for up to a year. The program also reduced hopelessness and clinical levels of depression and anxiety. Additionally, the PRP worked equally well for children from different racial/ethnic backgrounds.

The program's effects were strongest when the group leaders were members of the PRP team or trained by them. Some of the group leaders only read the PRP material and were not trained directly by the PRP team.

The second program, the PPP, sought to help students identify their signature character strengths (e.g., kindness, courage, wisdom and perseverance) and incorporate these strengths in day-to-day life. The program consisted of 20 to 25 80-minute sessions delivered during ninth grade. The students wrote in journals about the activity.

One exercise involved the students' writing down three good things that

happened each day for a week. Examples were: "I answered a really hard question in Spanish class," "I helped my mom shop for groceries" or, "The guy I've liked for months asked me out." Next to each positive event, the students answered the following questions: "What does this mean to you?" and "How can you increase the likelihood of having more of this good thing in the future?"

To determine the program's effectiveness, 347 high school students rated their love of learning, kindness, behavioral problems, enjoyment of school and grades. The students were randomly assigned to a class with the program or to one without. The teachers and parents also rated the students but were not told who took the program.

The students who took the program reported more enjoyment and engagement in school. The teachers reported those students were more curious about what they were doing, loved learning and showed more creativity.

Effects were particularly strong for students in regular, non-honors classes. According to mothers' and teachers' reports, the students in the PPP had more empathy, self-control and desire to cooperate and assert themselves.

Teaching children how to foster their own resiliency, purpose in life and positive feelings can bring "new prosperity" to people's lives, Seligman said. "It is important to start in the formative school years, so positive thinking and resilience are instilled and available to handle future challenges."

Source: American Psychological Association ([news](#) : [web](#))

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