The Personal Synthesis Programme:

Being positive with people who are HIV positive

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Abstract: *The Personal Synthesis Programme (PSP) is a comprehensive programme of personal development that addresses universal areas of human life such as emotions, thinking, self-regulation, confidence, coping, motivation, communication, relationships etc. Each of these areas is approached on theoretical, practical, reflective and interpersonal levels. The aim of the programme is to increase the sense of control and self-direction in participants' lives. The programme has been run with HIV+ participants for the last six years. It has consisted of weekly two-hour sessions throughout an academic year. PSP has been evaluated using a triangulation method. The evaluation has shown significant gains in the areas of self-awareness, internal control, emotional control, optimistic outlook, confidence, awareness of others and relationships.*

Key words: 'Personal Synthesis'; 'HIV+'; 'Personal Development Programme'; 'Positive Psychology'

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Introduction

Personal Synthesis Programme (PSP) is a systematic and comprehensive programme of personal development that integrates cognitive, affective, behavioural and social aspects. The programme focuses on developing qualities such as handling emotions, building confidence, making decisions, dealing with anxiety, coping with stress, communicating effectively, forming constructive relationships and so on. It enables individuals without a psychological background to apply findings from psychology and related disciplines to their everyday lives. PSP has been implemented in a number of educational institutions and other organizations (Popovic & Boniwell, 2006), but the focus here will be on running it over the last six years at Positive East, one of the major HIV+ centres in the UK.

It should be clarified at this point that PSP does not directly address HIV related issues (although some of them inevitably emerge in discussions). Neither is its aim the ubiquitous concept of well-being. Such an aim would be either too vague or not universal enough (well-being may mean a different thing for a gay Londoner and a Catholic African immigrant with two children). The purpose of PSP is to empower participants to deal with life challenges on their own and to be more competent in personal matters, which is more likely to be effective than assuming that we know what their problems are and what the best way to manage them is. To put it simply, the aim is to enable participants to be more in charge of their lives, so that they can choose a direction in accord with their own sense of well-being. This is achieved through increasing their skills, understanding and knowledge of various ways they can relate to themselves and the world around them. There is unambiguous evidence that fostering an internal locus of control has positive effects (see, for example, Charlton, 1988) and reflects the non-prescriptive facilitation of optimal functioning advocated by Linley and Joseph (2004).

The content of the program

In accordance with the above aim, rather than starting from the outcomes that are supposed to be produced in participants, the programme

focuses on basic areas of human life, underlying 'building blocks' (such as thinking, feelings, decisions, desires, coping, motivation, behaviour, communication, etc.) that comprise other complex experiences. This has several advantages:

- The ability of individuals to deal with challenges they face is largely based on these underlying components. For example, how somebody will respond to recreational drugs depends on a number of factors such as: openness to new experiences, an ability to distinguish between being daring and reckless, susceptibility to peer pressure, recognizing one's motives, balancing one's feelings, developing self-control, accepting responsibility for oneself, relating to pleasure and one's own body. If these factors are not attended to, there will always be a 'weak link' that would render a direct approach to drug-abuse ineffective.
- Addressing participants' problems directly can be perceived as patronizing and obtrusive. Starting from general topics may be a better way to motivate them to face and deal with their situation in a constructive way.
- Concentrating on the basic areas of human life makes the programme relevant to all participants (from different cultural backgrounds, for example) and yet sufficiently flexible, so that they can adapt it to their personalities and circumstances.
- There are a limited number of these areas, whereas there are an unlimited number of their combinations. Therefore, this approach enables the programme to be comprehensive, despite inevitable time constraints.

Several criteria are used to identify these basic areas:

- *Irreducibility*: the areas included are those that cannot be reduced to other areas of life or their combinations (without losing their essential qualities). For example, each of the factors related to drug-abuse that are mentioned above is a part of the program, but drug-abuse itself is not, because it can be reduced to their combinations. This criterion is important to avoid overlap or repetition.
- *Universality*: each area plays a part in the life of every individual regardless of their culture, beliefs, inclinations or personal qualities,

so they are relevant to everybody. This also means that they are 'timeless', therefore pertinent to any future that may come.
• *Transferability:* the relevant knowledge and skills are not specific, but can be applied in a wide range of situations.
• *Comprehensiveness:* all of the areas should cover the totality of human experience, leaving no gaps. This is vital because they are connected and affect each other.

The topics, or areas, are organised in four categories (four modules):

• *The Personal category* is normally the first module in the programme. This is because the other categories rely on it to some extent. It includes a number of areas that relate to persons themselves, starting with *Self-awareness.* The main focus in this area is on the obstacles to self-awareness (e.g. self-deception) and methods to overcome them. The next one, *Relating to oneself,* addresses self-acceptance and self-rejection (and also guilt and shame), while *Self-evaluation* deals with self-esteem and self-respect. Further on, this category includes areas related to affect (e.g. *Emotions*, *Moods*), cognition (e.g. *Learning*, *Reasoning*) and personal integration (e.g. *Harmonization*).
• *The Being category* incorporates the areas that relate to our life experiences. Some examples are: *Courage* (the purpose of fear and courage, and methods of controlling fear), *Pleasure* (the difference between pleasure and happiness, and what leads to fulfilling pleasures), or *Interest* (dealing with boredom). This category ends with the group of areas that are associated with the perception of one's life situation (including the present, the past and the future).
• *The Doing category* includes the areas that relate to choice and deliberate actions. The first group of topics in this category deals with the issues of meaning, personal freedom and responsibility, and also decision making. Another group (that includes *Strategy*, *Achievement, Coping and Control*) is dedicated to problem solving. The rest is mainly concerned with motivation, goals and effective performance (e.g. *Organization* discusses time management and planning).
• *The Social category* is mainly concerned with relating to others. It depends, to some extent, on the other categories and also overarches them. This category includes areas such as *Belonging* (which is about

being a part of a group) *Awareness of others* (listening, observing, empathy), or *Relationship dynamics* (starting and ending relationships and resolving conflicts with others). The Social category (and the whole program) ends with examining different types of relationship: intrinsic (friendship), instrumental (e.g. professional relationships) and intimate relationships.

At first glance, the number of areas may look overwhelming (64 altogether). No doubt that for all practical purposes it would be much easier to narrow the focus. Indeed, there have been many attempts to reduce personal development to one or a few elements: values (Ward, 1982, p. 135), critical thinking (Ennis, 1993), self-esteem (Nuttall, 1988), wisdom (Reznitskaya & Sternberg, 2004), problem solving (Priestley et al, 1978), or moral behaviour (Pring, 1984). However, there does not seem to be a panacea of personal development that would be the answer to everything, because various areas of life relate to and affect each other (negatively and positively). A comprehensive approach can help participants to deal with many personal and interpersonal issues, some of which may not be foreseeable in advance. The two-dimensional model of all the areas and their categories can be found in Popovic (2005).

The structure of the session

Each of the above areas is approached on three levels: theoretical, practical and reflective. A well structured session contributes to the motivation of facilitators and participants alike. However, the priority remains to engage participants in considering the subjects in relation to their personal experiences, so this structure is fairly flexible.

The theoretical level consists of relevant information about a particular area drawn from psychology and other related disciplines. Pieces of information that have mainly academic value are not included, but only those that can be utilised by participants in their everyday lives. For example, in the area *Emotions*, rather than focusing on the neurophysiological basis or psychological models of emotions, various ways of regulating emotions are examined. Wherever it is feasible, materials present the whole spectrum of possibilities, so that all

participants can find something relevant for themselves (e.g. those who lack self-confidence, as well as those who are overconfident). The materials are also constructed in a non-biased, balanced way to minimize any possible indoctrination. Both, desirable and undesirable aspects of each area are examined (e.g. sincerity and lying in the area of *Communication*). This has several advantages: it enables better awareness and control over participants' own actions and motives, it enables better recognition of the motives and actions of other people, and it preserves participants' autonomy.

The practical level introduces various methods and interventions that can increase the awareness, quality of experience and mastery of an area. A wide range of techniques are included (from relaxation and meditation, to brainstorming and conflict resolution). All of them - and there are over a hundred exercises all together - are designed in such a way that participants can continue using them on their own.

The reflective level: there are some aspects of human life that do not have universal answers. The choice will always depend to some extent on subjective, personal experience. On this level, participants are encouraged to consider some questions relevant to the topic and engage in a reflective activity which can help them to clarify their views and values and integrate their personal experiences.

In addition, the interpersonal level also plays a significant part– participants are encouraged to engage in discussions, share their experiences and learn from each other. In a few occasions this also has led to 'grass root' initiatives such as going to the gym together, or helping each other with temporary accommodation, job hunting or babysitting.

Teaching Methods

The activities sometimes involve the whole group, working in pairs or small groups. A variety of methods are used: presentation, questions, discussion, instruction, exercises and writing. This is necessary because effective programmes need to involve every aspect of the person: perceptive, cognitive, affective and behavioural. Different participants are also inclined towards different ways of learning, so it is easier to engage them if they can find a learning mode that suits them. Furthermore, the sessions need to be adapted to participants'

cognitive and language abilities, so in some cases activities such as games, role playing, telling stories and drawing need to be emphasized over the presentation. Such an approach enables building confidence, sensitivity, openness, concentration and trust, as well as raising self-awareness, self-esteem and awareness of important personal and social issues. Participants are encouraged to be pro-active throughout the session by making suggestions, sharing experiences, expressing doubts and conflicts and receiving help and encouragement from other participants and the presenter in resolving them. This requires a non-judgmental, open and supportive atmosphere. Once the method becomes established, participants usually express a real desire to work in this way.

Implementation with HIV+ participants

The programme is run throughout the whole academic year in the premises of Positive East. The sessions are held weekly and last two hours. Normally, two topics are covered per session. Each module lasts eight weeks totalling thirty three weeks (with one introductory session). This length contributes to achieving sustained personal changes. The participants join the programme on a voluntary basis and receive a certificate at the end of the course, based on their regular attendance. The programme has been run for six consecutive years.

- *Participants' background*. Participants in the first group were mostly African females, but subsequent groups reflected the mix of white gay participants and African men and women, which has had an interesting (and sometimes even amusing) effect on the dynamic of the groups. Different religious orientations are usually found within the same group (Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, Atheist). The age varies from early 20s - 60s.
- *Social and economic background.* The majority of participants have been from socially and economically deprived backgrounds, many of them are in receipt of welfare benefits and a significant number have been newly arrived immigrants, asylum seekers or refugees. Besides their health, many participants have been facing other difficulties: housing problems, unemployment, isolation,

immigration problems, drugs issues and homophobically motivated physical attacks. The most important issues for many are a lack of confidence and coping with their present situation.

Abilities and psycho-behavioural profile: language and cognitive abilities varied from individual to individual within a group, from high to very low. Similar differences could be recognized regarding participants' emotional intelligence, social skills and personal awareness. Some of them had learning or emotional-behavioural difficulties. A number of participants have been already in counselling, several were on medications and some have decided to use counselling services in parallel with attending the sessions.

Evaluation and Feedback

Considering that Positive East is a service provider, it was impossible to have a control group. A multiple triangulation approach has been employed, consisting of participants' evaluations (focus groups, written testimonies, a questionnaire); observations (by the facilitator and external observers); and monitoring behavioural changes.

Participants' evaluations

Focus groups: The participants who took part in this type of evaluation process stated that they found the PSP sessions very useful because they made them more aware of their feelings, able to control their emotions better, and be more confident. They also benefited from understanding different cultures and learning not only from the facilitator but from each other too. The participants reported that the PSP has helped them learn how to work in a group, which they could apply elsewhere. Most of all, they enjoyed finding out about themselves and others, how to respond to certain situations and practical activities and exercises.

Evaluation forms
The programme has consistently received a mark of 'excellent' (or equivalent) in evaluation forms completed by participants in compliance with the requirements of the organisation.

Written testimonies by participants

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse 27 testimonies from participants about their experience of the programme. The researchers were interested in individual perspectives, as well as searching for commonalities in the data, which is why IPA was selected. This method has been originally developed and used largely within health psychology, but is utilized widely nowadays in various other areas of psychology (Smith, 1996). IPA is used to explore participants' personal lived experience and how they make sense of it (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The emergent themes were identified from the testimony data, which were then organized into the following super-ordinate themes:

- *Awareness* (of self, situation, others), e.g. 'I believe that this course has really helped me to be aware of my feelings, to listen to my feelings and to others, especially those closest to me…'
- *Control, being in charge of one's life*, e.g. 'My life is in a shambles but with this course I am more able to control temper and pain.'
- *Confidence*, e.g. 'I have the tools to work towards achieving my aims, without making it feel like a strain. I feel more confident.'
- *Coping*, e.g. 'I have learnt new ways of relaxing when I am feeling stressed. I am now able to sleep better because of the exercises I have carried out.'
- *Broadening the mind, new ways of looking at things*, e.g. 'The programme has helped me immensely in terms of opening and broadening my mind. I am more aware of the society and the surroundings that I am living in. Also it has given me confidence, which I need when communicating with others.' 'It is an interactive, friendly way to improve your being and your life. It really makes me see things differently.'
- *Acceptance* (of self, situation, others), e.g. 'Being in the same class with Muslims made me realize that we are not so different'
- *Communicating better, expressing feelings*, e.g. 'It is now much easier for me to tell others how I feel.'
- *Increased optimism*, e.g. 'I am more optimistic about my future.'

Questionnaire

This small scale evaluation study employed a survey design using

a facilitator administered questionnaire. A 21-item questionnaire, designed specifically for the evaluation of this programme to measure self-awareness, satisfaction with life, internal locus of control, emotional control, confidence, optimism and social competence, was completed by participants at the beginning and at the end of the course. The analysis was based on a sample of 58 participants. Comparisons of means at pre- and post-test demonstrated significant gains in optimistic outlook, confidence and emotional control scores. Improvements were also noted in scores for most other items. This is consistent with the results obtained using qualitative methods. However, although these results were encouraging, it is not possible to attribute them solely to the PSP because of the lack of a control group.

Observations

The facilitator's observations have been based on retention, participation, and the group dynamics. Considering the length of the programme, retention has been very encouraging except in two groups that started with relatively small numbers of participants. However, objective factors such as health problems, housing relocations (in the case of immigrants) and re-employment, have had a negative effect on retention. Participation, active involvement and implementation of what was learnt steadily increased throughout the year in all the groups. A greater degree of group cohesion and trust was also noticeable in most cases. Some participants continued contacts outside, and many expressed a desire to do the course again.

- Evaluation by external observers: the programme was evaluated on several occasions by external observers sent by the educational institution that was initially involved in funding the project (Tower Hamlets College). These are relevant extracts and summaries from one such report:
- *Teaching*: 'A very warm, lively, responsive and engaging atmosphere. Good drawing of knowledge of the subject and good use of examples/strategies. Good relationships formed with the group, use of names, full affirmation of individual contributions and good use of humour. Strategies given were useful'.

- *Student response and achievement*: 'Participants engaged well and interested. Newcomers integrated quickly and well'.
- *Summary*: 'Subject and style of delivery entirely appropriate to the group. A positive and informative session, which people clearly enjoyed'.

Behavioural changes

The following tangible behavioural changes commonly occurred during or after the programme: a number of participants (who were able to do so) embarked on voluntary or paid jobs; most of them made some constructive changes regarding their physical health (starting to exercise, reducing or abstaining from smoking, alcohol and recreational drugs consumption); in some cases the use of anti-depressants have been reduced; improved relationships, especially with family members, have also been reported. Some of these changes have been long term, as evidenced by participants who continued using the facilities of the centre after they finished the programme.

Conclusion

Focusing on their personal development rather than their condition seems to be beneficial and welcomed by participants with a HIV positive status. The evidence indicates that addressing basic and universal areas of human life can contribute to the personal development of participants regardless of their age, gender, nationality, cultural background or religion. Evaluation of the programme has shown that significant gains have been achieved in the areas of self-awareness, internal control, emotional control, optimistic outlook, confidence, communication skills, awareness of others and relationships. Also, greater degrees of self-identity and independent thinking, and a better awareness of peer, family and other social issues were observed. However, there was a noticeable difference between those who were implementing theoretical/reflective insights or practical exercises regularly and those who were doing so in an ad-hoc manner. Moreover, since there was no control group, the above findings cannot be taken for granted. In any

case, there is no doubt that the programme heightens the awareness of psychological and personal matters and provides a 'space' for sharing. It also strengthens participants' sense that they can actively affect and control their psychological well-being, rather than feeling victims of their circumstances. As one HIV+ participant commented, 'The programme has helped me to become more positive!'

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