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EXPERT MASTERCLASS

Positively Successful: How (and Why) to Teach a Happy Class

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Speaker

Daniel Lerner, Bestselling Author, Clinical Instructor, NYU, USA

Summary Paragraph/Key Points

The topics of happiness and success do not correlate as often as we would like, and when they do they often do not correlate the way we feel that they ought to. From a child who observed his parents as successful musicians, Lerner was raised with the concept that happiness equates to success. In his first job of talent management he learned a valuable lesson: if an artist makes a mistake on stage or in the public arena, his essential coping mechanism has to be one of family love and support.

This led Mr. Lerner to study psychology and particularly the correlation between success and happiness, wherein he found a sharp divide.

In a study of white collar professionals, he discovered that certain levels of success equate to nicotine and alcohol abuse, and depression. 40% of doctors claimed that they would have chosen a different career, and only 6% have positive morale – despite their median salary of \$187,876. Furthermore, 60% would not recommend the career.

And it is not just doctors. Lerner uncovered a broader trend between the amount of money being made and the corresponding level of depression. Although teachers have an “amazing opportunity” to shape young minds, in his research 81% of K-12 teachers experienced depression, anxiety or stress. 9.5% quit before the end of their first year, and 50% quit teaching within five years. The statistics for teachers are very similar to other professions.

Our students are suffering too. Amongst teenagers, 30% are sad or depressed, 31% overwhelmed, and 23% claim to have skipped meals due to stress. Of Mr. Lerner’s 500





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students, 90% have “felt overwhelming stress”, 59.6% have “felt very sad”, 45% felt “things were hopeless” and 31.3% were “too depressed to function”.

“The connection between success and depression is a trend that runs across ages and applications,” states Mr. Lerner. “Science is now showing us that when we are happy we are far more likely to succeed. Evidence proves that success does not lead to happiness.”

Lerner quotes Masters, Barden and Ford 1979, and their study of 5-yr-olds, who were given Lego to build a design. The first group followed a specific design “brief”, the second group were told to think of something made of sand, and the third group were told to think of something that would make them happy. The children who were “primed with positive emotions” were about 30% more accurate and successful in their work, and 50% more accurate, than those who started on a non-emotional playing field.

In another study from 2014, Hinton found a very strong correlation between good work and happy thoughts. Those who are taught positive emotions in schools display improved memory, they are better at creative problem solving and delivered higher grades. They retain more and are more creative. They answer more exam questions, and answer a higher percentage of questions correctly.

Also, these students with higher levels of positive emotions are perceived as more appealing by others, and more likely to achieve positive solutions to their interactions and conversations.

In a study by Estrata, Isen and Young 1997 of doctors, three test groups were established. The first received no priming, the second were given a medical journal, whilst the third were treated to a bag of candy. The third group claimed to feel that their spirits were lifted, and as a result their patient diagnoses were 20% more accurate than the non-primed group.

Throughout workplaces from schools to businesses, Lerner describes how the effect of positive emotions on our work is incredible. Therefore, Lerner claims, happiness is critical to success. And the methodology can be learned. Lerner recommends we “**invest in happiness**”, even with an exercise as simple as sharing marshmallows with his students. “I’ve never seen students in a large lecture hall so eager to participate and interact with professors. I can’t wait for them to do it again.” (Student blog from his class of 2014).

Simple strategies can work, such as asking students to consider their own happiness with a simple question: “**What went well?**”. It works even better if they write it down and share it. In doing so, everyone acknowledges their own happiness, and shares in that of others. Lerner defines this as “The Happiness Discussion”, whereby students discuss what happiness means to them.





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For older students, **“The Gratitude Journal”** is considered by Lerner as the most empirically sound tool that he knows of in the field of psychology to encourage and drive positive emotions. Not only during the course of the month that people do it, but also after people had finished the journal, levels of positive emotions were still elevated six months later. Through this exercise, we “rewire our brain” to scan for positive experiences in our lives.

Lerner says it is also essential to be a mentor. From studies of people who are thriving socially, financially and professionally, the most successful were those who recalled a mentor.

Mentoring others enables us to find a deeper level of meaning in our lives. “How does the work that I do help the world be a better place? How does the work that I do help other people live their lives?” This question of finding meaning and raising levels of positive emotions, delivers tremendous benefits to those who are mentors.

Happiness therefore has a profound effect, but is not enough. Lerner shares a matrix of elements of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. By considering each of these, we can thrive in our lives at a level of true well-being. Using the analogy of buckets, Lerner says we have to have at least a drop in each bucket. He encourages his students to benchmark themselves against this matrix on an ongoing basis.

Lerner frequently talks about passion and finding meaning with his students, and at the end of the semester he gets feedback from them. One student he recalls shared his story of success and corresponding pressure since he was a child, however as he attended Lerner’s classes he realized he was doing it all for the wrong reasons. He discovered what really made him happy. And when he shared this with his parents, they told him, “All we ever wanted you to be was...happy.” For the first time in his life, he felt happy.

As teachers, we have an “amazing opportunity” to not only fill our students’ glass with ideas, but we can “change the shape of the glass”. We can change the way our students engage with their lives, by putting happiness before success, and then they can change the rest of their lives for the better.

MAIN TAKEAWAY: Studies have proven that happiness and positivity are critical – either innate or learned – and directly correlate to the success of students.

