

## Session 4:

Bad drives out Good  
Simplifying your life  
Public health: well-being the new driving factor?

L4 Positive psychology  
Steve Draper

4 Feb 2016

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## Bad vs. Good

Any references are in the Baumeister et al. 2001 review:

Baumeister, R.F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K.D. (2001)  
"Bad Is Stronger than Good"  
Review of General Psychology vol.5 no.4 pp.323-370

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## Discuss

Write down the one (or two) news items that first come to mind.

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## Baumeister's Bad vs. Good review

This review fits right in with the manifesto of Positive Psychology. It argues that bad (negative) things (events, ...) have a much bigger impact on people's views, attitudes, emotions, than good ones do. [So we need PosPsy to correct this awful tendency to disproportionate gloom]

It is very convincing to almost everyone.

I've made students do CRs on it; but still they were basically convinced by it.

I, unlike everyone else, think it's horribly mistaken.

I will now try to convince you .....

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## Areas

The review covers these topics, and claims research in all these areas supports their bad > good thesis.

- Impression formation
- Reacting to events (hedonic treadmill adaptation)
- Relationships
- Emotion words
- Learning
- Neurology
- Child Development
- Social support
- Information processing
- Memory
- Stereotypes
- Self
- Feedback
- Health

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## Relationships (Gottman)

For established married couples, he showed that negative behaviours e.g. disparagement, had about 5 times as much effect as a positive one in predicting breakups.

But take people who've just met: a single oblique compliment can be given much more significance than a pile of negative banter.

Actually many of us know people / circles of friends where politeness is the norm; and other circles where rudeness / insults are the norm. The impact of good/bad there is relative to our expectations of that context; not anything absolute.

But is this true of parents' relationships with their young children?

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## Reacting to events

Brickman et al. compared those who'd won the lottery to those who had been paralysed in an accident.

Which would you rather have: win the lottery AND be paralysed, or neither?

"Most convincing are the studies where they attempted to ensure equal objective magnitudes (such as when people gain vs. lose the same amount of money ...)" BUT winning your second million is not the same as losing your first and only million (i.e. all your money). I.e. the quantity of money is not a measure of the utility for a person.

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## Emotion

The claim is: people recall and use more words for -ve emotion than for +ve.

Two counter-questions.

1) Emotions are responses to unexpected changes to the status of our life goals. If we are all in basically good shape we have more to lose than we have to gain. So we, because of our privileged life, are much more likely to have a good life damaged, than to suddenly find a solution to having no good expectations for some goal.

2) In our culture do we have more to gain from sharing bad experiences or from sharing good ones? Aren't we more likely to be laughed at (say) for describing how well off we are, than how badly off we are? E.g. if I discuss my teaching with colleagues, ... [Co-rumination]

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## Child development

[B1]

Child IQ depends on both heredity and parents' educational level. They say that parents' low educational level overrides IQ heredity, but high level does not, and that therefore bad is stronger than good.

In fact, high IQ depends on having both good genes and a good family environment: missing either one matters. This is a vitamin model: you need a minimum level of all of them: any deficiency overrides sufficiency in all the others. Calling this "bad is stronger than good" presupposes wrongly a model of additive forces where some might be stronger than others: in fact all are equally necessary.

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## Stereotypes

[A2 need]

The issue I'd raise here is what we use stereotypes for: usually, for people we don't need. We can afford to have distorted thinking when there are few negative consequences in being over-cautious.

When you are in a minority, or need friends: this type of thinking isn't useful; otherwise it may hurt or disadvantage them, but not immediately yourself.

Ditto for "impression formation": used to judge people we don't need.

Does a baby use this on their mother?

Does a new employee use it on their boss?

To study impression formation is to study people considering those they don't need: where the main issue is risk, and few if any rewards are in prospect.

## The counter-argument [A1]: Ceiling effect

Picture a man or woman who has everything.

How could they see any new thing as good? Any change is either neutral (makes no difference to them) or is bad (they lose something they had). For them, bad must outweigh good. But this isn't a human psych. characteristic, but a characteristic of that person's situation in life.

In fact, it is hard to find a present to please many affluent people: they have everything they want.

Are 10 meals 10 times as good as 1 meal to a hungry man?

Going a day without food: what equally strong +ve is there?

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## The counter-argument [A2]: Level of need

My suggestion is that every one of the experimental situations is in fact asymmetric between good and bad. Take needy people, and a different pattern emerges. Give them 4 job rejections and 1 job offer, which will make the impression?

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### Counter-argument [A3]: Adds choice OR forces change?

A lot of the findings may really be about whether and how much the person had to change in response to the event; not whether it was good or bad. I.e. it is mental effort that determines the impact.

We win £50 and it doesn't make us change what we do;  
We lose £50 and we may feel we have to do something if only to check anxiously whether we have enough money to cover our regular spending.

Win the lottery: less urgently required life changes than does losing a limb.

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### However: vitamin model [B1]

However wherever many things must all be sufficient or the whole breaks down, then "bad is stronger": one bad apple, one pinhole in the dam, one murderous attack and a thousand kind actions is still enough to make that woman a bad one to marry. When we need to rely on someone, average behaviour isn't what matters.

This is absolutely true. I.e. an objective fact about many situations (not about human psychology), that success depends on ALL the factors being present and the single bad one ruins the whole.

But it may additionally seem to apply for people with essentially happy lives: the single faulty aspect will get more attention than the well-running aspects because if you have/expect perfection, then overall value depends on the weakest link / aspect.

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### However: warehouse stores model [B2]

Conversely, in some situations good outweighs bad objectively: when any one of the factors considered will solve the problem.

E.g. getting one job offer outweighs 99 rejections; finding one uneaten food packet outweighs 99 empty wrappers when you need the energy to walk off the mountain; one road out of a flood outweighs all the blocked ones.

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### Summary of my arguments

So really I have 3 arguments against Baumeister et al.

- A. We are very close to fully satisfied: we can lose but not gain.
  - A. So in none of the studies are the good and bad of equal strength.
- B. Vitamin model: when you need every one of a set of things to be satisfied, bad IS worse than good. But this is not a psychological point.  
(If you have all then lose one is bad, gain one is no value; If you have only a few of what's needed, your situation is bad but gaining one back doesn't make you well.)
  - B2. Warehouse case. In other cases, good drives out bad: objectively.
- C. It is the mental effort not the material changes that affect us.

## Simplifying your Life

Boniwell, I., and Zimbardo, P (2003). "Time to find the right balance"  
*The psychologist* Vol.16 pp.129 – 131

Ben-Shahar, T (2007)  
*Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfilment*  
(Mcgraw Hill)

PosPsy09-10 wiki

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## Simplifying your life

### The proposition

The idea is, that to be happier we should simplify our lives.  
Too often people are goods-rich and money-rich, but time-poor.  
This diagnosis doesn't apply to all people in all times and places; but seems to apply to very many people here and now.

### Symptoms

Feeling rushed the whole time  
Don't have time to stop and talk to people  
Don't have time for catching our breath, let alone reflecting  
You pass spectacular scenery, but can't watch it;  
Hear an interesting remark, but can't start a conversation and see where it leads.  
When something unexpectedly good happens, you don't have time to experience it.  
No time to taste your food, only to swallow it while hurrying  
No time to talk to your family, ....

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## Remedy

### Suggested Remedy

Cut out / give up large chunks of your planned activities; leaving plenty of time for the more important ones  
I.e. decide your priorities, then be generous with time allocated to them.

Including time for the unexpected (good and bad)  
Time for just musing ...

Stop filling every minute of your time in advance.  
(Flow means having no sense of how long things are taking.  
Over-filling means planning in a way that prevents flow.)

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## Why do we so often over-fill our lives?

To avoid boredom. (One of the two dangers when not in flow)  
*Childhood; your adulthood; driven professional life.*

### Over-focus on "hygiene" goals

... on avoiding bad things and not enough focus on positive goals (meaningful things)

Because we think we must have a plan; and then that we mostly only do what we have planned. (But this presupposes perfect fore-knowledge.)

Gratitude is in part about acknowledging we are not in control of everything important to us.

Over-planning and over-filling our time is acting as if we were in total control.

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## Why do we do it? (2)

Plans, if you really want to be professional about planning your life, should include contingency allowances of time;

Contingency time to recover from unforeseen problems.

How not to be late all the time? ...

Contingency time to appreciate and exploit unforeseen good things.

Come to see plans as a structure for organising activity until something important happens; not as a prescription excluding all other actions.

Time for planning itself

Before that, time for evaluating what happened so you don't just go on planning the same old way with the same defects.

Time for thinking, in other words

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## Learning may depend on open time

When someone (a student, say) is struggling to get started with something (a new kind of task; understanding a new concept) they are unable to articulate the right question, even.

Early-stage learning depends either on a teacher personally directing the learning, and monitoring it without the learner saying anything; Or on there being a situation where the learner can hang out, pick up the answer without asking for it, babble without feeling it's wasting the other person's time, ...

The more a student (or patient?) is in trouble, the less they feel able to make an appointment, push for the right service, articulate the specific question.

The importance of open doors, ....

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## So is this about? ...

Doing each high priority thing properly, not skimping;  
AND abandoning lower priority activities.

You need time for meditation, reflection, mindfulness, .... for mental processing as well as for the actual action.

## Precursors; related topics

Monks: chastity, obedience, poverty are radical simplifications.

Peter Owen Jones. Franciscans; Buddhist monks; and begging each day.

Crofting, self-sufficiency farming, living in the wilderness.  
(Actually, these lives are often more complex in activity, but simpler in the number of people you interact with.) Anti-Adam Smith?

Zimbardo's "Time perspectives": a character trait, depending on what balance an individual has between focussing on past, present, and/or future.

Delayed gratification and Walter Mischel's marshmallow study with children.

## Discuss

Take 2 mins. to jot down your personal answers to these questions;  
Then discuss them with neighbours.

1. To what extent do you over-fill your life?
2. Do you over-plan or under-plan your time (your life)?
3. How afraid of boredom are you? Do you do perhaps silly things to avoid it?
4. How much time do you spend doing nothing, listening to nothing (but your thoughts)?

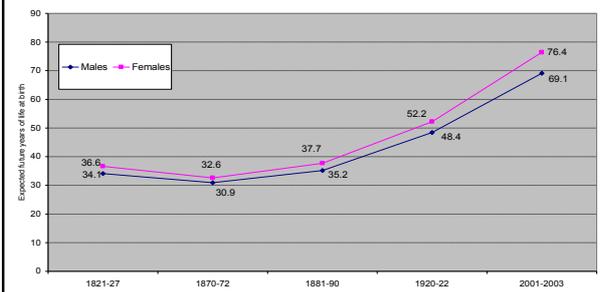
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## Phil Hanlon on public health and well-being / PosPsy

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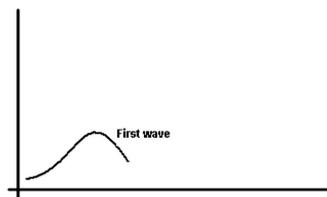
## Life expectancy

Expected future years of life at birth by gender for Glasgow; 1821-27 to 2001-03  
Source: The Report of the Medical Officer for Health, Glasgow, 1925; ONS 2004



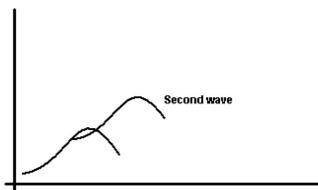
## The first wave of public health

1830-1900: classical public health interventions (water and sanitation), emerging civil and social order. Bottom up and top down working together.



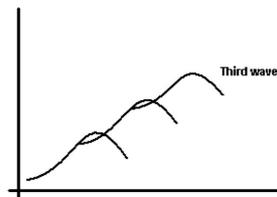
## What caused improvement in the second wave?

1890-1950: scientific rationalism provides breakthroughs in many fields including manufacturing, medicine, engineering, transport, communications. Vaccines start their impact. Hunger in the UK abolished.



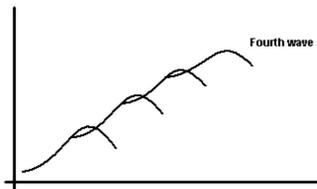
## What caused the improvement in the third wave?

1940-1980: the welfare state and the post-war consensus saw the emergence of the National Health Service, social security, social housing and universal education.



## What caused the improvement in the Fourth wave?

1960-2010: Effective health care interventions further prolong life and risk factors and life style become a central concern of public health. Smoking identified as lethal, usage starts to drop.



## What could cause a fifth wave?

Can we hope for further increases in health and longevity?

The problems:

Obesity, diabetes, alcohol related deaths, ....

Inequalities that might give clues:

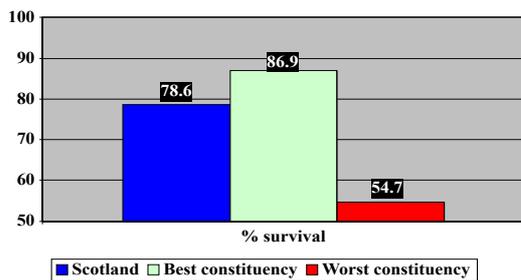
Differences amongst areas in one country (Scotland) [postcodes]

Differences between genders?

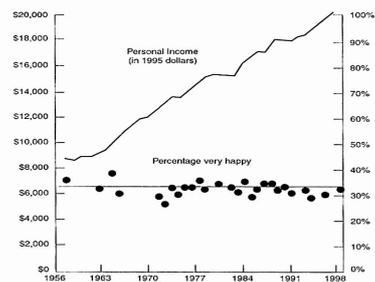
Differences between countries. Culture?

## Percentage of 15 year-old males surviving until 65

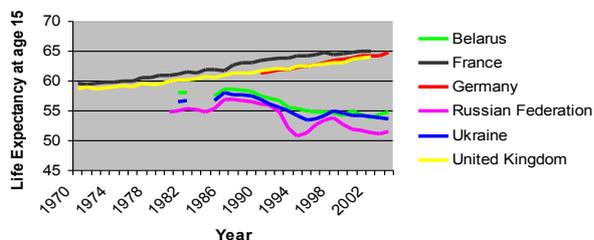
Year: 2001; Source: GRO(S); NHS Health Scotland



## Life satisfaction and personal income



## The Effect of Economic Recession on Life Expectancy



Source: Adapted from WHO health for all database [Available at <http://www.euro.who.int/hfahb/>].

## Cause of poor health in Glasgow?

It's not wealth but it might be the culture.

"The Tears that Made the Clyde: Well-being in Glasgow" (2010)  
- Carol Craig's book on Glasgow

## Some slides from a talk by Phil Hanlon

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[www.afternow.co.uk](http://www.afternow.co.uk)



**It's the culture – stupid!**  
**With apologies to Bill Clinton**



## The Iron Cage of Consumerism

“People live in their own bubble, getting in their own car to drive to work, staying in their own home. Community spirit has gone and this compounds the issue. We're all in debt. You're stressed, you go to work, you go home. You sit in front of the TV. There's no family dinner, no time to talk problems through, sort things out. You're just working to afford that TV. There's no time for your children when you come home at night. No time to talk.”

(Prisoner group)



## Education as a consumer product

“People everywhere live busy, consumer-driven lives. Their energies are devoted to money, mortgages and there's no time for emotional energy. Parents round here want to be something, they're conscious of material wealth and income and have worked hard to get here. They have more stuff, cars, washing machines – but they're still dreadfully poor, because it's relative. They know that educational qualifications are what allow you to make that step up so they push for results. They can't afford to pay the fees but they want to treat us as a private school! Their children are the same. It's very much 'I want to be a lawyer, doctor or dentist'. They're very materially focused.”

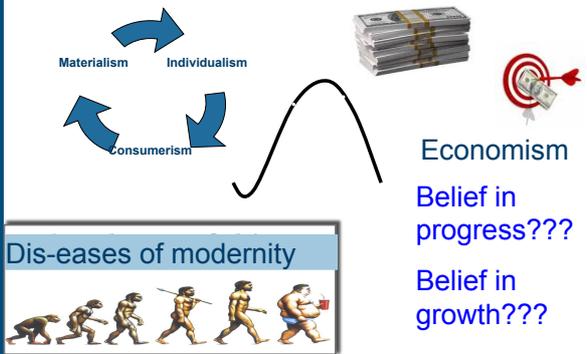
(Headteacher)

Spiritual value or exploitation through fear

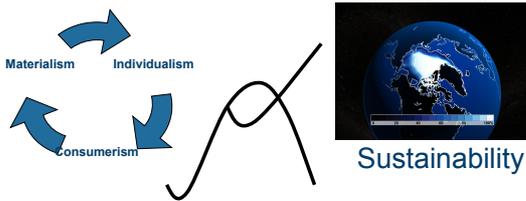
“Our focus needs to go down to the spiritual, to the value and worth of a human being. Virtually nothing in society promotes that. We are exploitable because we are fearful. If you live in a society that's been founded on exploitation of the masses, how are you going to de-condition them? How do you make people feel more confident in themselves?”

“We're **all** trapped in the cycle of consumerism. And powerful groups can't be expected to support anything that will counter techniques for maintaining social dominance.”

Modernity is in crisis

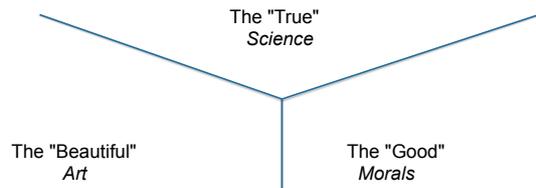


Modernity is coming to an end – a change of age

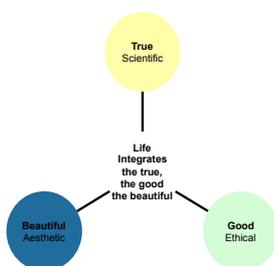


Dis-eases of modernity

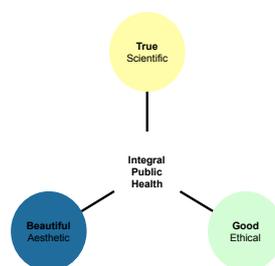
Plato's idea

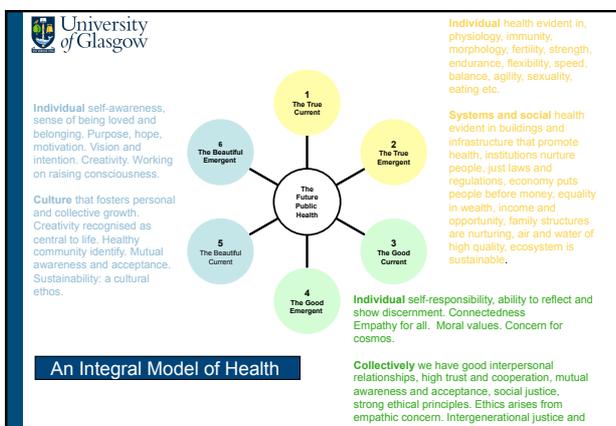
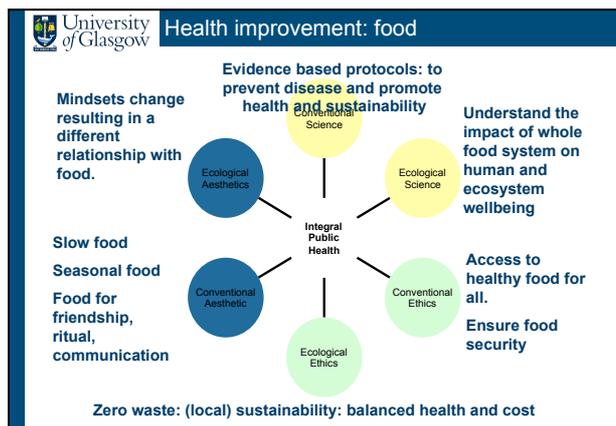
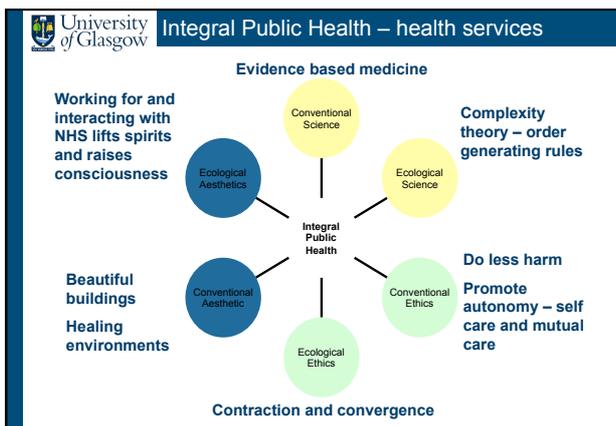
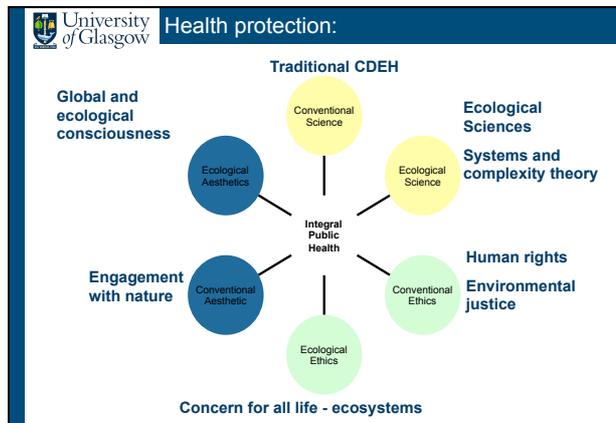
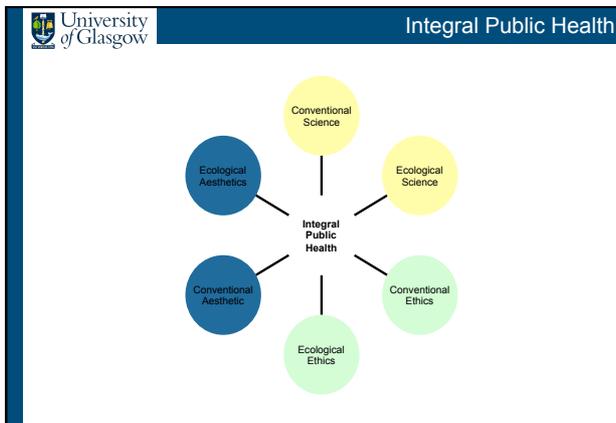


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## Green space effects

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## PosPsy and owning pets

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## Owning a pet

Applying PosPsy to animals: what the responsible owner / vet should know? (PosPsy 2012-13 "Applying PP to animal well being") [broken]

The 2014 posPsy wiki page on "Pet yourself positive": are there definitely positive effects of owning a pet?

Joe Hutto "Illumination in the flatwoods" (1995) / "My life as a turkey"

Attachment theory  
Exercising parts of ourselves that aren't theorised / talked about.

## Educational benefits of Mindfulness

Siobhan Lynch (@Southampton)

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## Education and mindfulness

As mentioned earlier, mindfulness training (MT) has become strongly established in the academic literature in the last 20 years.

Many studies show benefits in clinical populations; others show benefits in subclinical populations.

A review paper (Regehr et al. 2013) shows that mindfulness training reduces anxiety levels in student populations in numerous studies. No surprise if this were then to raise their learning performance.

## Direct learning benefits of mindfulness

However recently evidence is emerging of more direct benefits than simply reducing clinical problems in HE students.

Mrazek et al. 2013 showed that it increased GRE (graduate record exam) scores of reading comprehension by  $\approx$  20%; And that it did so through improving concentration = reducing "mind wandering". I.e. a kind of anti-ADHD measure.

This suggests that control of attention is the key thing (a key mediating variable in stats/ psych theory parlance).

## Roll out?

So should we be rolling out mindfulness training for all students?  
(Or if you're a private enterprise type, holding students to ransom and making them take out extra loans for this essential competitive skill)

I hear that the UK school sector is seeing this rolled out. (Michael Bready, who gave a talk on MT to this class two years ago, is now too busy doing this ....)

Siobhan Lynch has done a PhD on this; and is interested in pushing this in HE. I heard her talk last summer (if you can remember that), and I'm keen now.

## Roll out (2)

Can it be done online; or must it be done expensively in dedicated small face to face classes?

Reid. (2013) reports success at this.

## A place to stop

Course takeaway for practical applications:

- Exercise
- Mindfulness meditation

<http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/courses/posl4.html>

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