

Ground Yourself through Faith and Positive Psychology

By Heidi Vermeer-Quist, Psy.D.

Around the time of Y2K (history lesson: that's the year 2000 when people were pretty freaked out about everything shutting down technologically), I recall learning about this "new" psychological approach called "positive psychology." Dr. Martin Seligman, president of the American Psychology Association, was actually encouraging optimism to treat mental health conditions and to promote mental resiliency. At the time it seemed like psychologists thought his solution was too simplistic, almost "pollyannaish." (That's a funny word to me, because what in the world is wrong with Pollyanna? She was a positive, resilient orphan.)

After decades of research using the positive psychology approach to promote Resiliency (how to help people to be mentally tough through difficult times), Seligman and his team demonstrated that this positive psychology approach works! These days I'm sharing the "five pillars of positive psychology" with my patients, my family, my colleagues, and basically with anyone who wants to listen and apply. Will you join this movement?

Here are the "five pillars of positive psychology," or PERMA (if an acronym helps you remember the five pillars ☺):

- **P for Positive** emotion. Do something that produces positive emotions. Think of simple things and "what works well" for you. Just finish the following sentence: "I like... (think of a type of food, music, or activity)." What works well to produce positive emotions for you? Notice the blessings in the precious present moment.
- **E for Engage**. Whatever you do, do it mindfully, engaging your whole mind into what you are doing. If you are driving, just drive; if you are reading, just read; if you are walking, just walk...you get the idea. This pillar brings a Bible passage to mind for me, Colossians 3:23: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters."
- **R for Relationships** (positive ones). Engage in positive relationships vertically (with God) and horizontally (with safe, supportive others). Notice how Jesus points us right to relationships when he was asked to explain the greatest commandments: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40). Love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself. Invest in positive relationships. Commune with God constantly. And lean on those SAFE people who have consistently been there for you, who listen to your "yes" and respect your "no"; people who are both honest and kind.
- **M for Meaning**. We grow through tough times. Resilient people are quick to look for the meaning and growth opportunities as they deal with tough times and adversities. As you take those deep breaths, also take a step back. Play the Pollyanna "glad game," looking at

your circumstances from different angles to see the good, to see the purpose, to see the meaning. If you have a tough time with this, read stories written by two Holocaust survivors: Corrie Ten Boom ("The Hiding Place") and Victor Frankl ("Man's Search for Meaning").

- **A for Accomplishment.** It feels good to get stuff done. Keep It Super Simple (the KISS principle). Give yourself a pat on the back for folding some laundry, washing those dishes, planting a few flowers, putting away groceries, creating something, fixing something, asking for help, taking a shower—stuff that you can get done! You are not “better” because you get stuff done, but you will feel better 😊.

Remember, your worth and value are not determined as a human DOING. God made you a human BEING. You are loved by God, created in his image to love him back and love others. God is taking care of you. Believing that is faith. Throughout the pages of the Bible we are affirmed over and over again that we are loved, accepted, significant, and secure. Slow down and breathe that in again!

If you are already applying the PERMA pillars of positive psychology to your life, you will likely notice that in many cases you already do these rather well. Affirm that also! Keep catching the Automatic Negative Thoughts (I call those ANTs) that are running around in your head, especially recognize if they are “O” zone thoughts (Others, Outcomes, Old stuff). Release them to the Lord in prayer and replace them with these practices of faith and positive psychology.

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