

Role of Focusing on the Positive Side During COVID-19 Outbreak: Mental Health Perspective From Positive Psychology

Keiko Yamaguchi

National Center of Neurology and Psychiatry, Tokyo, Japan

Yoshitake Takebayashi

National Center of Neurology and Psychiatry, Tokyo, Japan, and
Fukushima Medical University

Mitsuhiro Miyamae, Asami Komazawa, Chika Yokoyama, and Masaya Ito

National Center of Neurology and Psychiatry, Tokyo, Japan

This paper discusses how positive emotions can help maintain and improve mental health during the COVID-19 outbreak, taking into account examples of social interaction and positive psychology research efforts in Japanese context.

Keywords: positive emotion, COVID-19, pandemic, strength

The uncontrollable spread of coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) has been promulgating a sense of fear and hopelessness, and there seems to no longer exist a safe place anywhere in the world. Mental health crises are occurring worldwide, affecting individuals in a variety of ways, including stress, anxiety, fear, helplessness, and depression. Although the number of COVID-19 infections and mortality rates in Japan have remained relatively low compared with those in Western countries, the country is still on the edge of an explosive spread of infection (Looi, 2020), and thus, there is a rising public interest in mental health care. Previously it has been shown that positive emotions, such as comfort, happiness, joy, love, and gratitude, can help maintain and improve human mental health. However, given that the positive emotions are often experienced in inter-

personal relationships, the current situation that requires maintaining social distance inhibits the development of positive emotions and forms the basis of the mental health crisis.

In the current situation, various initiatives have been implemented worldwide and also throughout Japan to maintain fun and emotional connections through social interaction while maintaining physical distance. For example, the Japanese musician Gen Hoshino (2020) proposed to relish his song, “Dancing on the Inside,” by layering sounds and images in different ways, and people responded by uploading their enjoyable moments on social networking sites, attracting a lot of attention online. There is another example of Nintendo Co., Ltd.’s online videogame called *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* in which the players go freely back and forth between each other’s houses to engage in social interaction in virtual space (Strampe, 2020). Such efforts that are put together to facilitate joyful and emotional connection, even while maintaining a physical distance, represent a positive change during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the findings of psychology research, positive emotions have also been shown to be important for the psychological recovery process of individuals who have experienced intense stress or have developed mental disorders, such as depression. For example, emotion regulation utilizing positive emotion during negative emotional states explained the depressive symptoms prospectively in a questionnaire survey conducted on university students (Yamaguchi, Ito, & Takebayashi, 2018). Additionally, previous research has shown that deliberately savoring ordinary and casual behavior using the five senses can help amplify positive emotions (Quoidbach, Berry, Hansenne, & Mikolajczak, 2010). Based on these findings, the positive valence system-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy for anhedonia has been developed and is undergoing a clinical trial in Japan (Ito et al., 2019). Therefore, whereas it is normal to feel anxious and exhausted during the ongoing crisis, focusing on and savoring the positive emotions that can be felt in the midst of it could serve as the first step in feeling more calm than ever before.

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 Keiko Yamaguchi, National Center for Cognitive Behavior Therapy and Research, National Center of Neurology and Psychiatry, Tokyo, Japan;  Yoshitake Takebayashi, National Center for Cognitive Behavior Therapy and Research, National Center of Neurology and Psychiatry, and Department of Health Risk Communication, School of Medicine, Fukushima Medical University;  Mitsuhiro Miyamae, National Center for Cognitive Behavior Therapy and Research, and National Institute of Neuroscience, National Center of Neurology and Psychiatry; Asami Komazawa, Chika Yokoyama, and  Masaya Ito, National Center for Cognitive Behavior Therapy and Research, National Center of Neurology and Psychiatry.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Yoshitake Takebayashi, Department of Health Risk Communication, School of Medicine, Fukushima Medical University, 1 Hikarigaoka, Fukushima City, Fukushima 960-1295, Japan. E-mail: ytake2@fmu.ac.jp

Moreover, the psychological crisis we are facing right now can prove to be a turning point for looking back at what is most important to us and also discovering new aspects about ourselves. For example, recognizing the physical, social, and psychological resources present around us and searching their strengths as we reflect on small daily experiences may provide further hints for building personal resilience (strengths-based cognitive-behavioral therapy; Komazawa & Ishimura, 2017; Padesky & Mooney, 2012). It may also serve as an opportunity to observe our experience of psychological well-being and to reflect on the purpose and meaning of our lives (e.g., Fava, Cosci, Guidi, & Tomba, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic could rightly be termed as a loneliness pandemic (Santos, 2020); however, focusing on the positive side will not only help alleviate the loneliness but will also give us the strength to survive this difficult phase.

Although we hope for this crisis to end soon, the COVID-19 pandemic portends to be more prolonged than initially expected. Therefore, if we continue to merely endure the negative emotions, we will soon run out of patience and tolerance. Thus, devising a way of life that allows us to stay with the feelings, such as joy, calm, and happiness, even in the crisis situation, may, in turn, help in the maintenance of our mental health in the long run. In Japan, where the COVID-19 outbreak has not yet hit as hard, it would be worthwhile to learn from the world's previous outbreaks, and tackle the stress of the current pandemic better, through the use of preventive mental health care strategies from a positive psychological perspective. It should also be considered that the mental health care strategies introduced in this paper are few of the various approaches available and that each approach should be applied according to the social situation and individual needs.

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