

Building human strength: psychologys forgotten mission

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Before World War II, psychology had three missions: curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent. After the war, two events changed the face of psychology. In 1946, the Veterans Administration was created, and practicing psychologists found they could make a living treating mental illness. In 1947, the National Institute of Mental Health was created, and academic psychologists discovered they could get grants for research on mental illness.

As a result, we have made huge strides in the understanding of and therapy for mental illness. At least 10 disorders, previously intractable, have yielded up their secrets and can now be cured or considerably relieved. Even better, millions of people have had their troubles relieved by psychologists.

Our neglected missions

But the downside was that the other two fundamental missions of psychology—making the lives of all people better and nurturing “genius”—were all but forgotten.

We became a victimology. Human beings were seen as passive foci: Stimuli came on and elicited “responses,” or external “reinforcements” weakened or strengthened “responses,” or conflicts from childhood pushed the human being around. Viewing the human being as essentially passive, psychologists treated mental illness within a theoretical framework of repairing damaged habits, damaged drives, damaged childhoods and damaged brains.

Fifty years later, I want to remind our field that it has been side-tracked. Psychology is not just the study of weakness and damage, it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken, it is nurturing what is best within ourselves.

Bringing this to the foreground is the work of the Presidential Task Force on Prevention, headed by Suzanne Bennett Johnson and Roger Weissberg. This task force will take on a number of jobs: It will attempt to identify the “Best practices in prevention” led by Karol Kumpfer, Lizette Peterson and Peter Muehrer; it will explore “Creating a new profession: training in prevention and health promotion,” by setting up conferences on the training of the next generation of prevention psychologists led by Irwin Sandler, Shana Millstein, Mark Greenberg and Norman Anderson; it will work with Henry Tomes of APA’s Public Interest Directorate in the ad campaign to prevent violence in children; it will sponsor a special issue on prevention in the 21st century for the *American Psychologist*, edited by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi; and, led by Camilla Benbow, it will ask what psychology can do to nurture highly talented children.

Building strength, resilience and health in young people

But an underlying question remains: How can we prevent problems like depression, substance abuse, schizophrenia, AIDS or injury in young people who are genetically vulnerable or who live in worlds that nurture these problems? What we have learned is that pathologizing does not move us closer to the prevention of serious disorders. The major strides in prevention have largely come from building a science focused on systematically promoting the competence of individuals.

We have discovered that there is a set of human strengths that are the most likely buffers against mental illness: courage, optimism, interpersonal skill, work ethic, hope, honesty and perseverance. Much of the task of prevention will be to create a science of human strength whose mission will be to foster these virtues in young people.

Fifty years of working in a medical model on personal weakness and on the damaged brain has left the mental health professions ill-equipped to do effective prevention. We need massive research on human

strength and virtue. We need practitioners to recognize that much of the best work they do is amplifying the strengths rather than repairing their patients' weaknesses. We need psychologists who work with families, schools, religious communities and corporations to emphasize their primary role of fostering strength.

The major psychological theories have changed to undergird a new science of strength and resilience. Individuals—even children—are now seen as decision-makers, with choices, preferences and the possibility of becoming masterful, efficacious or, in malignant circumstances, helpless and hopeless. Such science and practice will prevent many of the major emotional disorders. It will also have two side effects. Given all we are learning about the effects of behavior and of mental well-being on the body, it will make our clients physically healthier. It will also re-orient psychology to its two neglected missions, making normal people stronger and more productive as well as making high human potential actual.

Accordingly, the theme of APA's 1998 Annual Convention in San Francisco, Aug. 14-18, is "Prevention: building strength, resilience and health in young people." I urge you to bring your family, particularly your children and your grandchildren.