

Chapter 13

Positive Psychology Research in Israel: Current Reality and Future Vision

Anat Shoshani and Mario Mikulincer

Introduction

The Middle East is considered to be a field laboratory for the empirical study of topics related to stress and trauma. Protracted exposure to political violence, terrorism, and war have made the region the focal point of works on post-traumatic stress and psychopathology (Slone & Shoshani, 2014a). Armed conflicts fueled by national and ethnic antagonisms have become the hallmark of the Middle East. War, terrorism, and hostilities that result mostly from the Arab-Israeli conflict, the instability in the Gulf region, and the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have engendered extended periods of political instability and mass casualties. Complex regional demographics and multicultural populations have led to inter-ethnic and religious conflicts, including the bloody war between the Sunnis and the Shiites (Kam, 2014). The Middle East is divided into rich and poor countries, and between militarily and economically powerful countries and weaker countries that are unable to defend themselves. Some countries in the region have accumulated powerful weapons of mass destruction, and the region as a whole is characterized by an atmosphere of distress, fury, and fear (Slone & Shoshani, 2008a). Since the end of World War II, no other region in the world has had such a high concentration of political violence covering the whole spectrum from limited conflicts to full-scale wars, terrorist acts and guerilla warfare, and counter-terrorist military operations. The use of military force has become an inherent part of life and is virtually taken for granted and even considered legitimate in certain cases (Kam, 2014).

However, in recent years, winds of change, both in the world of psychology as well as in the region's political climate, have made the Middle East increasingly

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open to positive psychology as a foundation for promoting positive change at the individual, community, and inter-group levels. In the last 20 years, there has been a pervasive shift in psychology from human problems and pathology and how to remedy these ills to greater interest in well-being and life satisfaction and how to foster psychological growth and a more harmonious, happy, and peaceful world (Seligman et al., 2005). In the Middle East, we have witnessed the emergence of the Arab Spring, which was characterized by waves of social protests, political turbulence, and voices of change that spread throughout the entire region. These events have elicited renewed hope for change, peace and stability, and greater well-being in the Middle East (Dabashi, 2012). The need to adopt a hopeful, constructive and positive approach to these complex socio-political events makes positive psychology a natural springboard for the issues facing the region. However, research on positive psychology and its applications in the Middle East have been slow to develop.

Israel is also seen as a natural laboratory for the study of traumatic and post-traumatic reactions (Klingman et al., 1993). Continuous exposure to high levels of inter-group violence and hostilities that characterize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has turned the country into a test bench for examining psychological responses to stress as well as for developing psychological interventions aimed at increasing individual's resilience and coping skills. Research has focused on the detrimental effects that exposure to high levels of conflict, war, and political violence have on Israeli and Palestinian children's psychological functioning and well-being, which are manifested in posttraumatic stress (PTS) and a wide range of both overt and covert psychiatric symptoms (Guttman-Steinmetz et al., 2012; Shoshani & Slone, 2008b; Slone & Shoshani, 2008b, 2017). At the same time, research has relied on the insights and knowledge coined in positive psychology in order to develop effective interventions against stress-related emotional problems. As a result, Israel strikingly differs from other Middle East countries in the unprecedented surge of research and implementation of positive psychology in the educational system.

During the last three decades, numerous psychological interventions have been developed in school settings aimed at reducing and preventing children's psychopathological responses to exposure to political violence (Slone et al., 2013; Slone & Shoshani, 2006a, 2006b). Studies assessing these interventions have highlighted a wide array of protective and resilience factors that improve children and teens' coping abilities and sustain a positive, hopeful attitude in face of traumatic events. For these reasons, positive psychology interventions have been integrated into the Israeli educational system to help reduce psychopathology, build resilience and psychological strengths, and promote well-being and tolerance toward out-groups. Schools have increasingly been identified as the optimal context for supporting and promoting students' emotional and social wellbeing (Slone & Shoshani, 2014b).

One outstanding example of these positive psychology interventions is the Maytiv program for teachers and students in kindergarten and elementary, mid-level, and high-level schools (Shoshani & Guttman-Steinmetz, 2014). This program was developed by the Maytiv Center (Hebrew for "doing good"), an international academic center for research and practice in positive psychology, and has served over 5000 teachers and 200,000 children and adolescents in the Israeli educational

system during the last 7 years. Each year, this program is implemented in about 100 schools in Israel.

Given both the prolonged and intense exposure to political violence, terrorism, and war, and the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions in the country, Israel has become one of the world's largest laboratories for research and application of 'positive education': the growing application of positive psychology in school settings. This chapter describes the positive psychology revolution in the educational system of Israel, reviews the pioneering roots of positive psychology research in the Middle East, and advocates empowering schools and community institutions as optimal settings for strengthening mental health and wellbeing in areas of stress, conflict, and war.

The Positive Education Revolution in Israel

Imagine a school where the teacher calls student's parents to say a kind word about their child and to tell them how their child helped someone that day, participated well in class, or even just that he/she is a lovely child. Imagine a school that has a sign at the entrance that reads, "Love without thinking about what you will get in return". Imagine a class that begins with each student describing something good that happened to him or her the day before. Imagine a report card noting the child's character strengths, or teachers who personally mentor students in achieving their scholastic, social, and emotional goals. Imagine the school walls decorated with posters that express positive messages, and math, language and history classes incorporating positive role models and messages that encourage investment, perseverance, and grit in studying.

These examples, and many others like them, epitomize the types of positive psychology-based practices that children and their teachers experience in hundreds of schools involved in the Maytiv program in the Israeli educational system. The program is based on the belief that happy, optimistic, and emotionally stable students, who believe in their own abilities to fulfill their goals and their skills to realize their heart's desires, will like to be at school, learn better, and then reach higher academic achievements. The program focuses on factors that past studies have consistently found to mitigate distress and enhance emotional stability, happiness, resilience, self-discipline, self-actualization and life satisfaction, and their application in teachers' and students' lives as well as in the school's daily routine.

Maytiv was founded in 2010 at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, Israel by four psychology scholars. Dr. Tal Ben Shahar is a well-known Positive Psychology teacher, lecturer, and best-selling author. Dr. Ariel Kor is an entrepreneur and researcher, who has launched several successful educational, social, and philanthropic initiatives in the fields of character education, positive psychology, and spirituality. Prof. Mario Mikulincer is an internationally renowned researcher in the fields of interpersonal relations, attachment, stress, and coping. Dr. Anat Shoshani is a prominent researcher in the fields of children's resilience and

wellbeing, and an expert in the development of community-based interventions in Israel. The Maytiv positive education program was developed by Dr. Ben-Shahar and Dr. Shoshani, two of Maytiv's founders, who are both recognized positive psychologists in Israel and international experts in the field of positive education.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar is an internationally renowned American and Israeli teacher, and author of numerous works in the fields of positive psychology and happiness. His Positive Psychology course at Harvard University attracted the largest student body of any course ever taught at the University. Upon returning to Israel, Dr. Ben-Shahar taught numerous positive psychology courses at IDC Herzliya, a leading academic institution in Israel, and was one of the founders of Maytiv in 2010. Dr. Ben-Shahar is the author of several books on Positive Psychology, one of which, "Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment" (2007), became an international bestseller and has been translated into 25 languages. In recent years, Dr. Ben-Shahar has co-authored several children's books in Hebrew about famous figures such as [Helen Keller](#) and [Thomas Edison](#), where he applied core components of positive psychology and character education. In 2011, Dr. Ben-Shahar co-founded 'Potentiallife', a company that offers positive psychology programs to business and non-profit organizations around the world.

Prof. Anat Shoshani is an assistant professor in the School of Psychology at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya and the academic director of Maytiv. Prof. Shoshani acquired her extensive practical experience in implementing and studying community-based interventions during her PhD studies at Tel Aviv University, where she developed methods to enhance resilience and positive health outcomes for young people confronted with protracted conflicts (e.g., Shoshani and Slone [2008a](#); Slone & Shoshani, [2006a](#), [2006b](#), [2008a](#), [2008b](#)). After joining IDC Herzliya in 2010, her research continued to concentrate on maximizing resilience among children, teens, and their families. Prof. Shoshani's work focuses on variables that positive psychology has identified as protective factors, such as character strengths and virtues, positive relationships, meaning in life, and positive experiences, and examines their role in promoting children's resilience, well-being, and mental health (e.g., Shoshani et al., [2014](#), [2016a](#), [2016b](#); Shoshani & Slone, [2013](#)). Prof. Shoshani has also published a series of papers on the correlates and outcomes of the VIA classification of character strengths and virtues in children and adolescents (e.g., Shoshani & Aviv, [2012](#); Shoshani & Slone, [2013](#); Shoshani & Slone, [2016](#)). She is also widely known for her pioneering research in the field of positive education (Eldor & Shoshani, [2016](#), [2017](#); Shoshani & Eldor, [2016](#); Shoshani et al., [2016a](#); Shoshani & Steinmetz, [2014](#)).

The Maytiv Program: Its Structure and Impact on Israeli Children

The Maytiv positive education program is an extension of Seligman's (2011) PERMA Model for well-being and adjustment in school settings (Kern et al., 2014; Norrish et al., 2013). The model is made up of five essential elements that enhance flourishing and lasting wellbeing: Positive emotions, Engagement, Positive Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement, which together create the acronym "PERMA". In extending this pioneering model, the Maytiv program focuses on eight major components that are implemented in a stepwise manner over the course of the intervention:

1. Developing emotion regulation skills (expression and reinforcement of positive emotions and management of negative emotions),
2. Fostering gratitude and appreciation,
3. Cultivating flow experiences and enjoyment while learning,
4. Fostering healthy interpersonal relationships,
5. Promoting acts of kindness, care, and compassion,
6. Utilizing character strengths and virtues in daily life,
7. Cultivating resilience factors and persistence skills, and
8. Identifying and pursuing meaningful self-concordant goals.

The program is comprised of two parallel positive psychology curricula: one for students and one for teachers. Since the homeroom teachers are the natural facilitators of change in schools and have the greatest potential to influence their students' perspectives and skills (O'hara & McNamara, 2001), Maytiv instructors deliver the program to teachers and teachers implement the students' curriculum in their own classrooms. Specifically, the teachers' curriculum is delivered by Maytiv instructors to teachers in the form a professional development workshop. Then, after each session, teachers instruct their students using the students' curriculum with age-appropriate lesson plans and activities.

Both the teacher training and the student curriculum comprise 15 90-minute sessions that occur every 2 weeks, such that the teacher's session precedes by 1 week the students' session that teacher deliver in their classroom. At the beginning, teachers also receive two introductory sessions on positive psychology, and are equipped with a textbook that includes the students' curriculum material, including detailed session plans and activities, for each of the 15 sessions, thereby ensuring standardization of the intervention. In addition, teachers are given a USB storage device with PowerPoint presentations and multi-media materials, such as songs and short clips, for each of the 15 students' sessions.

Since the students' curriculum encourages learning beyond memorization of the material and its purpose is to educate emotions, guide attitudes, and inspire action, students' sessions follow a five-step plan that the teachers adhere to when delivering them. Each session starts with two to three stories that serve as the springboard for delivering the main session's messages. Each session also contains one to two

exercises or activities that are completed individually, in pairs, or groups. After each exercise, teachers are trained to encourage students to engage in a discussion that revolves around several guided questions that refine and enrich their understanding of the subject matter. In the next stage, students have the opportunity to write about the discussion, the exercise, or the story. The final stage encourages students to take the ideas and insights from the session and apply them in their lives. Taking action is a crucial step in internalizing and assimilating the material.

The teacher workshop starts at the beginning of the school year. The first month of the training consists of two introductory sessions to positive psychology. From the second month of the program onward, the workshop specifically focuses on the core concepts that will be later delivered by teachers in the students' sessions. For example, if the next students' session deals with positive emotions, the teacher training's session covers this topic by giving a comprehensive overview of the concept. They are exposed to relevant theories and empirical research, participate in experiential activities, hear stories, and learn about possible applications of the concept in their own personal life as well as in the school setting. The second half of the session focuses on instructional methods for delivering the session to students. At this stage, teachers begin implementing the students' curriculum in their classroom. They learn a certain topic in the training session, practice and assimilate the material in their personal and professional life throughout the week, and teach the topic in their classroom the following week. In the next teacher training session, they discuss and share their experiences with their colleagues and learn about a new topic.

The Maytiv Program: Evaluation Studies

The Maytiv program has been empirically assessed in two published studies conducted in Israel (Shoshani et al., 2016b; Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014). Both studies were longitudinal evaluations lasting 2 years and were designed to examine the effectiveness of the Maytiv school program on the subjective wellbeing and social, emotional and academic functioning of middle school students. In the first study (Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014), 537 mid-school students who participated in the program were compared to 501 mid-school students in the same age group and grade range from a control school. Then, in a two-year longitudinal design, the study assessed changes from baseline at the end of the program and one-year follow-up in mental health and subjective wellbeing. Findings showed statistically significant decreases in depression and anxiety symptoms in the intervention group, whereas psychiatric symptoms in the control group increased significantly. The intervention also strengthened students' self-efficacy, self-esteem, and optimism only in the intervention group but not in the control group.

The second study implemented a within-school randomization of 70 classrooms (2517 students) in six middle schools that were randomly assigned to intervention and control groups (Shoshani et al., 2016b). Although the emphasis in the Maytiv program is on emotional and social aspects, findings also indicated that the program

had a significant positive impact on the students' scholastic achievement as expressed in their grade point averages [GPAs]. Moreover, students participating in the program, compared to control students, exhibited a significant increase in their self-efficacy, learning investment (studying for tests, preparing homework), school belongingness, positive emotions, and quantity and quality of social ties with peers.

An example of the change that occurred in students because of the Maytiv program is captured in Einat's story, the principal of a school located in a suburban tourist town in the central area of Israel faced with high unemployment. At the beginning of the program, the teachers asked every student to write down what they wanted to be when they will grow up. The answers included professions such as taxi driver, mechanic, supermarket cashier, and hotel floor manager. After 2 years of running the program, the teachers again asked the same students to write down what they wanted to be when they will grow up, but this time the answers included professions such as surgeon, pilot, astronaut, school principal, mayor, and even prime minister. The program's motto is to believe in children, their abilities and their strengths, and thus make them believe in themselves. The conceptual shift from focusing on the weaknesses and problems of the child to focusing on the child's strengths fills children with faith and hope and permeates all aspects of their performance, in the academic, emotional and social areas as well as their perceptions of life.

The change in the school was also felt among the teaching staff. The program prompted a dialogue among teachers characterized by openness, listening, focusing on strengths, and mutual support. This change is particularly noted in the atmosphere within the teachers' room and their ability to cope with educational tasks by focusing on strengths and subjective wellbeing. Findings from both studies documented the range of benefits derived from evidence-based positive-psychology interventions in promoting children's mental health, subjective wellbeing and adaptive functioning.

Notable Positive Psychologists in Israel

Prof. Hadassah Littman-Ovadia and Dr. Shiri Lavy

Prof. Hadassah Littman-Ovadia and Dr. Shiri Lavy are Israeli researchers who are perhaps best known for their collaborative research on the interface between positive psychology and organizational psychology, and their studies on character strengths at the workplace. Prof. Hadassah Littman-Ovadia is an associate professor of Psychology at Ariel University in Israel. She is the chair of the Career and Organizational Psychology graduate program. Her studies focus on career counseling and development, mindfulness, as well as the VIA character strengths and their use at the workplace. In work in conjunction with the VIA Institute, Dr. Littman-Ovadia is involved in a number of large international projects on character strengths and virtues. Dr. Shiri Lavy is an assistant professor in the Department of Leadership

and Education Policy at Haifa University in Israel. Her work centers on close relationships at work and positive psychology factors, such as character strengths, positive emotions, and meaning in life, and their associations with work and life satisfaction.

Prof. Littman-Ovadia and Dr. Lavy first worked together to assess the reliability and validity of the Hebrew adaptation of the VIA Inventory of Strengths for adults (Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, 2012a). Since then, their individual and joint publications have shown that both recognition and daily appeals to character strengths in vocational settings are related to greater well-being, vocational satisfaction, and a meaningful experience in life and work (Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2017; Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010). They have explored several important factors that promote the implementation of strengths at work, such as supervisor support, and the relevance of specific strengths to actual work performance (Lavy et al., 2016; Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2017). They also pinpointed a number of underlying mechanisms that can help account for the associations between character strengths and job satisfaction and productivity, including positive emotions, engagement, and sense of meaning at work (Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2017; Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, 2016; Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010; Steger et al., 2013). In a recent study, strength of perseverance emerged as the component that had the strongest positive association with work performance and the strongest negative association with counterproductive work behaviors (Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, 2016). They also underscored the role of cultural differences in the endorsement of specific strengths and their contribution to well-being (Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, 2012b). These research initiatives have significantly contributed to the application of character strengths and virtues at the workplace.

Prof. Oren Kaplan and Dr. Yael Israel-Cohen

Prof. Oren Kaplan is the Dean of the School of Business Administration and an associate professor of Business and Psychology at the College of Management in Israel. He specializes in trauma-related and anxiety disorders, preventive and positive psychology, mental resilience, and coping with stress. Prof. Kaplan and Dr. Yael Israel-Cohen, a post-doctoral fellow at Northwestern University who specializes in Israel Studies, have co-authored several articles on risk and protective factors in the aftermath of exposure to terrorism, war, and political violence. In their studies dealing with times of war and missile attacks in Israel, they identified several risk factors that can lead to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including high arousal of positive and negative affect after trauma (Israel-Cohen et al., 2014) and negative affect and hope before the attacks (Israel-Cohen et al., 2016a, 2016b). They also explored several protective factors that can buffer traumatic stress, including gratitude (Israel-Cohen et al., 2015), perceived social support and religiosity (Israel-Cohen & Kaplan, 2016; Israel-Cohen et al., 2016), life satisfaction (Israel-Cohen, Kashy-Rosenbaum, & Kaplan, 2016a), and positive future orientation (Israel-Cohen,

Kashy-Rosenbaum, & Kaplan, 2016b). Their studies have shown that positive psychology factors can function as protective factors in highly stressful and traumatic situations.

Positive Psychology Research in Israel and the Middle East: Current Status and Challenges

Aside from the growing field of school-based positive psychology interventions in Israel, psychopathology and personal, interpersonal, and inter-group conflicts and problems are still the main focus of psychological research in the Middle East (Rao et al., 2015). The benefits of positive psychology in promoting better and healthier lives in Middle Eastern countries and individuals remains understudied. Positive psychology practices in the Middle East tend to import Western ideas and viewpoints about what is considered optimal functioning in individuals and communities and what people should aspire to become. This creates a Western bias that impoverishes the understanding of cultural variations in what constitutes optimal human functioning (Leong & Wong, 2003).

However, a number of research endeavors have been undertaken to assess whether positive psychology concepts and theories are suitable for Middle Eastern contexts, whether they need modifications, or should be viewed in terms of culturally relevant positive psychological phenomena. For instance, the association between social support and subjective wellbeing has been well documented in Western countries (Diener, 2000). However, in a cross-cultural study that compared American, Jordanian, and Iranian samples, perceived family support was found to predict higher subjective well-being (higher positive emotions and life satisfaction and lower negative emotions) in the three samples, but perceived friends support predicted some of aspects of wellbeing only in Jordan and the U.S. but not in Iran (Brannan, Biswas-Diener, Mohr, Mortazavi, & Stein, 2013). This lends empirical support to the theoretical argument that, in contrast to individualistic cultures, familial ties in more collectivistic societies have more importance than other social relationships for individuals' subjective well-being.

In another cross-national comparison of the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001) in Sweden and Iran, positive emotions predicted flourishing among Swedish youth, whereas a balance of negative and positive emotions predicted flourishing in Iranian youth (Kormi-Nouri et al., 2013). This study culturally contextualized the idea about the desirability of positive affect and the undesirability of negative affect, while highlighting the need for more nuanced insights about the factors that underlie subjective wellbeing in different cultures.

Some studies in the Middle East have aimed to translate and validate measures of positive psychology constructs developed in Western countries or to replicate studies in Middle Eastern contexts. For instance, Littman-Ovadia and Lavi (2012a) translated the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) into Hebrew,

validated its factorial structure, and replicated past findings about associations between different strengths, such as hope, love, gratitude, and zest for life satisfaction. Abdel-Khalek and Snyder (2007) formulated an Arabic version of the Snyder Hope Scale and validated it on a sample of Kuwaiti students. This study replicated previous findings on the association of hope with positive affect, life satisfaction, and optimism. In another replication study, Kuppens et al. (2008) examined the relationship between emotions and life satisfaction in 46 countries including Kuwait, Iran, and Turkey. Negative emotions were found to be more negatively associated to satisfaction with life in individualistic cultures, whereas positive emotions were more positively associated to life satisfaction in cultures that value self-expression. More recently, several studies have replicated the well-established association of religion and spirituality with subjective wellbeing in Middle Eastern countries (Koenig et al., 2012).

Another particularly important area of research in the Middle East involves the exploration of new positive psychology constructs. For instance, Shoshani and Russo-Netzer (2017) proposed three pathways for cultivating meaning in life during childhood, and developed a Meaning in Life questionnaire for children (MIL-CQ). Scores in this scale showed associations with life satisfaction, positive affect and mental health among Israeli children. Freidlin et al. (2017) developed the idea of optimal use of character strengths and showed that overuse and underuse of character strengths are associated with depression and social anxiety. Ghorbani et al. (2008) developed a scale assessing Integrative Self-Knowledge (ISK), a construct closely related to mindful self-awareness, and validated it on samples from the United States and Iran. Şimşek and Yalınçetin (2010) developed a Personal Sense of Uniqueness scale (PSU), validated it on several samples of Turkish university students, and showed that the construct is strongly related to mental health and fulfillment of basic psychological needs.

Mikulincer et al. (2006) examined the experience of forgiveness and gratitude in romantic relationships from an attachment perspective in an Israeli sample, and showed that insecure attachment orientations (higher attachment avoidance or attachment anxiety scales) are related to distortions in both of these virtues in close relationships. In addition, several researchers in the field of positive organizational behavior have conceptualized and developed novel constructs and practices that enhance optimal functioning in organizational contexts such as the Feedforward Interview (FFI) (Kluger & Nir, 2010), Listening Circles (Itzhakov & Kluger, 2017), and Strength-Based Performance Appraisal (SBPA) (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011).

Other important and interesting studies have extended positive psychology approaches to study topics that emerge indigenously in the specific social, political and cultural contexts of the Middle East. For instance, Slone and Shoshani (2006a, 2006b, 2008a, 2008b) developed several school-based prevention programs for strengthening the Israeli community during war and conflict. Their interventions were constructed, applied, and empirically evaluated at several points in time during wars and acts of terrorism that are part of the intractable conflict in Israel. These studies identified a number of sources of resilience that are at the disposal of children

in times of war, such as life meaning, social support, and internal locus of control. In addition, they identified the role that several clusters of character strengths and virtues play in moderating the relationship between conflict exposure and psychiatric symptoms among Israeli adolescents (Shoshani & Slone, 2016). Similarly, Hobfoll et al. (2009) examined resilience and chronic distress among both Jews and Arabs in Israel at two points in time during a period of rocket attacks and terrorism. They found that resilience was predicted by social support, high socio-economic status, being part of the Jewish majority in the country, and less loss of psychosocial resources. In another study, Hobfoll et al. (2012) examined life engagement among Palestinians who were chronically exposed to trauma and violence and found that loss of psychosocial resources was related to lower life engagement, whereas education level, social support, religiosity, and age predicted more engagement in life tasks.

Several studies have pointed to the moderating effects of positive reframing of stressful and traumatic circumstances. A sense of hope has been identified as a valuable asset that facilitates reframing of negative life events by evoking expectations for a better future (Shoshani, Mifano, & Czamanski-Cohen, 2016a). Gratitude emerged as a protective factor against post-traumatic stress symptoms by promoting appreciation of life and decreasing negative emotions (Israel-Cohen et al., 2015). Religiousness has also been found to serve as a protective factor during war and political conflict by promoting a broader sense of meaning in life (Slone et al., 2009). These studies have highlighted the relevance of positive psychology constructs to understand psychological responses to the social and political context of the Middle East.

Conclusions and Future Directions

While the desire for good health and wellbeing remains a driver and a key topic in positive psychology research in the Middle East, the main predictors of interest are religion, spirituality, character strengths, and social and family support. Nevertheless, commonly studied well-being factors (i.e., hope, optimism, positive emotions, gratitude, grit, flow, kindness, engagement) in positive psychology research around the world have only received scant attention in studies conducted in this region. This may reflect the social meanings and cultural values imbued to specific positive psychology constructs in Middle Eastern countries. Further research on topics emerging indigenously in the Middle East, together with more studies on understudied positive psychology concepts, hold a promise for developing the field in a manner that is sensitive to the cultural nuances of the Middle East context.

Policy development in the Middle East has yet to fully utilize the growing worldwide body of research on positive psychology and wellbeing. However, the appointment of a Minister of Happiness in the United Arab Emirates to promote national wellbeing initiatives and implement policies that foster people's ability to fulfill their potential and flourish may constitute a beginning. Further research in this

area can contribute to the design of positive psychology-based policy in Middle Eastern countries.

In terms of well-being practices, many positive psychology-based initiatives and interventions in Middle Eastern countries have been developed for workplaces, health centers, and education institutions. For instance, in Kuwait, a non-profit organization called Alnowair operates organizational wellbeing programs across the country and carries out national campaigns to spread the ideas of positive psychology (Rao et al., 2015). Nevertheless, many such initiatives remain small, local, and understudied. A systematic examination of these impressive efforts can help develop evidence-based interventions and provide practical and valid solutions to societal issues in the Middle East.

Governments across the world are gradually recognizing the importance of promoting subjective well-being at the individual, family, and community levels. In the Middle East, with its prolonged conditions of insecurity and stress, positive psychology-based interventions, such as the Maytiv programs, may constitute cost-effective preventive, therapeutic, and educational strategies that can be easily applied and scaled up for promoting wellbeing. The educational system, with its access to children and adolescents across demographic groups, is a crucial player in establishing preventive programs that can enhance children's subjective wellbeing, resilience, and ability to cope with the threatening context of the Middle East.

Efforts in the Middle East should also be directed toward the development of interventions that encourage and cultivate the expression of the most positive aspects of humanity such as kindness, compassion, caring and love of others, tolerance of differences, and concern for all human beings. In this way, positive psychology may pave the way for the emergence of peace, harmony, and stability in a region with a history of conflict, violence, and atrocities.

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