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SPAR - Positive Intervention Application Plan for Ashoka University

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SPAR - Positive Intervention Application Plan for Ashoka University

Abstract
Ashoka University, a distinguished liberal arts university that is the intellectual home to over 900 hundred undergraduate and graduate students in Sonepat, India. We present here a program to enhance well-being based on the fundamentals of positive psychology. The program can start with a pilot and then be scaled using either trained professionals or trained peer counselors. The components of the program include strengths, positive relationships, attention and resilience thus forming the acronym SPAR. We have designed the program to take place in four 90-minute sessions ideal for the Young India Fellowship Fellows schedule of five-week semesters. It is equally applicable to undergraduates and could also be rolled out for faculty and staff if desired. We include a slide deck that is ready to use for the first session.

Keywords
positive psychology, intervention, resilience, positive relationships, attention, strengths, SPAR, Ashoka University

Disciplines
Cognitive Psychology | Health Psychology

Comments
This is a paper for MAPP Service Learning Project 2017.
SPAR – Positive Intervention Application Plan for Ashoka University

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Master of Applied Positive Psychology

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Abstract

Ashoka University is a distinguished liberal arts university that is the intellectual home to over 900 undergraduate and graduate students in Sonepat, India. We present here a program to enhance well-being based on the fundamentals of positive psychology. The program can start with a pilot and then be scaled using either trained professionals or trained peer counselors. The components of the program include strengths, positive relationships, attention and resilience thus forming the acronym SPAR. We have designed the program to take place in four 90-minute sessions ideal for the Young India Fellowship Fellows schedule of five-week semesters. It is equally applicable to undergraduates and could also be rolled out for faculty and staff if desired. We include a slide deck that is ready to use for the first session.
Introduction to SPAR - Application Plan for Ashoka University

With 1.3 billion inhabitants and nine million students at 1500 colleges and universities, India is in desperate need of high-quality higher education. Although there are many small private universities, many of these are inadequate. A main part of the problem is that higher education in India has long been overly focused on job security rather than on cultivation of the mind for its own sake. A need was seen for a university of a different caliber in India—one focused on a Liberal Arts education that would encompass the humanities and both social and natural sciences, offering undergraduate and graduate programs in all areas of liberal studies. Thus, Ashoka University, a private, non-profit university was founded by a diverse group of entrepreneurs and professionals, the result of an unprecedented, collective philanthropic effort. Having benefitted from their own educational experiences at premier institutions around the world, the founders of Ashoka partnered with some of the most prestigious universities in the world to bring an innovative model of higher education to India in order to develop thinkers and leaders of the future.

The decision to bend Ashoka toward liberal arts was based both on industry need as well as the need to change the mindsets of Indian students and parents to see education as an end in itself. Indeed, a need for a shift in mindset is becoming increasingly apparent—as more students than ever before are enrolling in institutions of higher education, the competition is growing stiffer, and the level of depression and anxiety is rising among college-age students. Thus, Ashoka University is partnering with the Master of Applied Positive Psychology Program at the University of Pennsylvania in order to build well-being and provide a preventative, proactive, and pro-social solution. The objective is to build resilience skills among Ashoka students and prevent a buffer from the stress and anxiety that so commonly afflicts leaners today.
The Environment and Organization

India is the world’s seventh largest country by geographical area, the second-most populous country, and the largest democracy. India's higher education system is the third largest in terms of student enrollment, after China and the United States (Gupta & Gupta, 2012). Although the Indian education system is on a journey of growth, it has its set of challenges and needs. As India is largely a collectivist culture, parents have strong influence in deciding the career path for their children (Gore, 2015). Most parents, across all income groups, are reluctant to allow their children to do anything other than engineering or similarly conventional courses (Puri, 2015). Awareness about new subjects or a broader curriculum may exist, but acceptance of these programs is still largely missing.

There has been a significant increase in occurrence of mental disorders among college students, which can be explained in part by the constant pressures of scoring well, focus on mainstream subjects, meeting deadlines, managing increasing workload, coupled with the pursuit of excellence, dealing with competition, and coping with alienation from family and friends. In a study with Indian students (mean age of students was 19.3 years), depressive symptoms were present in 18.5% of the population, anxiety in 24.4%, and stress in 20%. Clinical depression was present in 12.1% and generalized anxiety disorder in 19.0% (Sahoo & Khess, 2010). It is also alarming that suicide has become the second leading cause of death in India among those in the age group of 18-29 (WHO, 2016). The stigma toward, and discrimination against, people with mental disorders is an important barrier to mental health in the country (Shidhaye & Kermode, 2013). It contributes to delays in seeking care, impedes timely diagnosis and treatment for mental disorders, serves as an impediment to recovery and rehabilitation, and ultimately reduces the opportunity for fuller participation in life (Shidhaye & Kermode, 2013).
There is an urgent need, therefore, to make mental health more accessible and more organized, as well as to shift focus toward the well-being of all students. Addressing depression, anxiety, and stress-related symptoms in this population requires a critical preventive strategy to avoid damage to the learning and development process, and to increase the general well-being of the students. Ashoka University, with the recent development of its Centre for Well-Being, is certainly moving proactively toward this preventive approach instead of focusing on measures to combat or treat mental health disorders (A. Singh, personal communication, July, 2016).

**Ashoka University, Sonepat, India**

Founded in 2014, Ashoka University is India’s first non-profit liberal arts university in the Delhi capital region. Its goal is to become a top-tier, world-class liberal arts institution in both its graduate and undergraduate programs and to transform higher education in India. It has some 7000 applicants for 550 seats and an enrollment of 925 with more than 50 world-class professors (Ashoka University, personal communication, April 2017). The University is the result of India’s largest collective philanthropic effort, with some 87 Founders investing in India’s future. Their generosity has enabled Ashoka to eventually build over 700,000 square feet of an ideal learning and living environment, which is being constructed at a cost of $100 million (Ashoka University, personal communication, April 2017). Ashoka’s intent is to help students become well-rounded ethical leaders – the very kind envisioned by Emperor Ashoka over two thousand years ago (Ashoka University, n.d.). Our cohort’s focus this semester was to develop an innovative peer-to-peer support program to help University students and/or faculty to increase well-being through improving self-awareness, bolstering self-efficacy beliefs, and implementing various positive interventions.
Literature Review

Working in conjunction with the Centre for Well-Being at Ashoka University, we designed a curricular framework and series of interventions for the community. We envision these to be primarily applicable to Ashoka students; however, with modification they may also be appropriate for faculty and staff. With the growing population at Ashoka, it is useful to think of well-being and flourishing in terms of community health, which is in accord with the mission and planning of the Centre for Well-Being. Here, the idea is to understand the broader implications of community well-being in order to remedy situations before they become problems (Prilleltensky, 2005).

Resilience

According to Reivich and Shatte (2002), resilience is a vital psychological substrate that can protect individuals by reducing the harmful effects of stress, buffering them against depression and anxiety, and providing them with constructive ways to react to challenges and conflict. A general definition of resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity and to grow and thrive in the face of challenges (Carver, 1998; Tugade & Frederickson, 2004; Tugade, Fredrickson, & Barrett, 2004). It provides preventive measures against psychopathology and affective disorders in youth (Gillham & Reivich, 2004) and acts as a buffer against traumatic experiences (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005). Current research indicates that resilience is a way of thinking that can be acquired as a skill (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Briefly, we know that, among other things, our self-awareness of body, mind, emotion, and our self-regulation of such, as well as the strength of our mental functioning, our optimism, skill mastery, and relationships, all have key roles in building resilience (Reivich & Saltzberg, private communication, February 12, 2017; Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Therefore, it is important to note that resilience can be built through
training and practice. Resilience training has demonstrated successful results in various populations, including children and adolescents (Prince-Embry, 2013), adults (Prince-Embry, 2013; Helmreich, Kunzler, Chmitorz, König, Binder, Wessa, & Lieb, 2017), and those in the military service (Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2015).

Our understanding is that resilience training has uses for students (and others) at Ashoka. Keeping in mind the needs of the university to build resilience through increasing self-efficacy, self-awareness, optimism and well-being, we will be focusing on four intervention topics: Self-efficacy, Positive relationships, Attention, and Resilience (SPAR). See Fig. 1.

![Fig.1. Components of SPAR Intervention.](image)

**Character Strengths—Identifying Strengths to Build Self-Efficacy**

Since the intent of positive psychology is to draw attention to positive assets of character (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), its conception has led to increased research into the concepts of strengths and well-being. In 2004, Peterson and Seligman created the Values in Action (VIA) classification system, a productive way of structuring the domain of 24 universally recognized strengths, which are natural capacities that we yearn to use. Peterson and Seligman’s
first criterion for a character strength is that it “contributes to various fulfillments that constitute the good life, for oneself and for others” (Criterion 1, pp.17–18).

An important application of organizing and understanding our strengths is building resilience. A basic ingredient in resilience is self-efficacy, which is an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977, 1982, 2006). Resilient people have learned what their strengths and weaknesses are, and knowledge and use of one’s character strengths can increase self-awareness, thereby strengthening self-efficacy beliefs (Govindji & Linley, 2007). Seligman (2002) shares that for people to make sense of their lives, they need a sense of certainty and self-understanding, through the emphasis of character strengths. Therefore, inviting students to use their character strengths in new and different ways can lead to significant increases in their happiness and significant decreases in depression, sustainable over a period of six months (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). By using strengths to navigate difficulties, it can be useful for students to think through how they might use strengths against specific problems and stressful events. In creating good experiences, they might focus on certain strengths to bring more joy into life or because they align with the kind of person they want to be, helping to set goals.

**Strengths and goal setting.** Goals and goal-setting have a reciprocal relationship with self-efficacy and strengths. Locke (1996) highlights the importance of self-efficacy beliefs in goal setting as he suggests that individuals can only provide high commitment to goals when he or she believes the goal is realistic. When exploring the connections between strengths use, goal progress, psychological needs, and well-being, it’s been found that those who used their signature strengths ultimately made more progress on their goals, met their basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence, and were higher in overall well-being (Linley
et al., 2010). Therefore, by learning about their strengths, students can set more practical and achievable goals or modify goal attainment plans. SMART goals, which are “specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and have a time-frame” (Latham, 2003 p. 311) can also be improved with the knowledge of character strengths. When helping students to set goals, it is important to teach them to identify their strengths and make SMART goals.

Positive Relationships

Experiencing more positive emotions increases our resilience, broadens our awareness of our surroundings, boosts creativity, builds stronger social connections, and improves physical health (Fredrickson, 2009). Happy people have better relationships, more successful careers, and longer, healthier lives. Well-being can come either from within, through interaction with a dyad, or a group, but data supports the view that close positive relationships are strongly linked to well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, Haidt, 2006). Indeed, the only standout trait among very happy people is that they are highly social (Diener & Seligman, 2002). There is also evidence that the network of interactions within a connected group can spread happiness, raising the collective state of well-being (Fowler & Christakis, 2008).

It is not difficult to understand that how happy a person is may depend on the happiness of those who surround him or her. Chances are, if a person’s social network isn't happy, then he or she won't be, either (Fowler & Christakis, 2009). Social support really does matter, because it helps us believe in ourselves more, which in turn helps us to achieve our personal goals (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). Interestingly, thinking we have support when we need it is actually better than receiving the support. Perceived support means believing that another person cares for us and will be there for us if needed (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). We enjoy knowing we have support, but of course we don’t ever want to have to ask for it. Still, we can allow ourselves to feel and show
gratitude for our social network. This, too, helps us as individuals, since people are more likely to notice new positive qualities and feel more connected and satisfied when feeling gratitude (Gable & Gosnell, 2011).

Being able to form close relationships—and keep them—is an important part of well-being (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). There are many positive aspects of having close relationships; they enhance our ability to capitalize on good news, cultivate social support, and often lead to self-expansion by helping us see other perspectives and grow as individuals (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). The research seems to support the idea that “sharing is caring.” When we share positive news with someone else, we experience more positive affect, well-being, and self-esteem, and less loneliness. The more people we share our positive news with, it seems the happier we are (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). This kind of sharing builds intimacy, whether we are givers or the receivers of the news. Apparently, it is not only misery that loves company. Human beings have evolved to be together.

So, how do we show people that they matter? We pay attention to them—the starting point is attention. A key strategy to nurture relationships is to simply make time for them (Lyubomirsky, 2008). For instance, if we use our attention to perform an act of kindness, this typically delivers the largest boost to well-being of any positive intervention (Seligman, 2011). In this, too, we must embark on a habit-forming process so that this kindness becomes part of our character.

Attention and Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the conscious observation of one’s physical, mental, and emotional experiences in the present moment. Mindfulness means paying attention to one’s own thoughts, actions, emotions and bodily feelings without judgment (Holzel et al, 2011). Creating habitual
mindfulness leads to better mental health, including decreases in anxiety and depression (Holzel, 2011). Most mindfulness intervention programs focus on removal of the unwanted illnesses such as anxiety, depression, stress, and insomnia, while mindful attention and attitude enable individuals to respond skillfully to challenges in life instead of reacting negatively or impulsively (Phang, et al, 2015). Mindfulness has the potential to lower the perception of stress and stress symptoms, and improve ability to cope with daily stressors.

Intention, attention and attitude are the three components that build upon mindfulness (Niemic & Lissing, 2016). This means each individual has the capacity to cultivate his or her desired outcome through mindfulness meditation. According to research, mindfulness-based trainings focusing intent on positive mindfulness practices such as relationships, self-regulation, improved attention, self-compassion, self-efficacy, and self-awareness all tended to be more successful in attaining the focus of their intent (Niemic & Lissing, 2016)). Through practicing meditation, one can become more attuned to internal moment-to-moment experiences. Attitude, the third component of mindfulness practice, helps to focus on the quality of thought within the present moment. People learn to become more aware of the curiosity, kindness, and acceptance in their own thoughts (Niemic & Lissing, 2016).

Mindfulness programs bring about improvements in positive variables such as positive affect, cognitive functioning, self-regulation, positive reappraisal of thoughts and improved personal interactions ((Niemic & Lissing, 2016)). The practice of mindfulness meditation can enable students to focus their attention on goals through their thoughts, actions, and behavior with deliberate intention instead of relying on negative and unhelpful habitual responses (Holzel, et al, 2011).
Future application

Ashoka is looking for a prophylactic approach to increase well-being within its community. The goal of SPAR is to enhance self-awareness, self-regulation, self-efficacy, self-care and relationship-building in light of the normal stresses that university students face in highly selective institutions worldwide. One of the useful aspects of the four modules of SPAR is that each can stand alone and students who miss one can still continue with the remainder of the program. In addition, it may make sense to re-arrange modules or offer the most popular ones more often. Using feedback from the pilot, the SPAR program can be modified as appropriate and opened to a broader audience.

Application Plan

Part I. Objective: SPAR—Well-Being is Worth Fighting For

The goals of this program and the accompanying interventions are to build self-efficacy, positive relationships, attention, and resilience. The pilot program is named for these goals—SPAR. From a promotional standpoint, SPAR works on a number of levels—including building a case for the fact that well-being is something worth fighting for. SPAR also compliments the concept of resilience; everyone is capable of fighting back against negativity with all the positive interventions that will be introduced through this program. The objectives of the SPAR program are designed to coincide with Young India Fellowship’s (YIF’s) current five-week semester schedule and to meet their immediate needs.

Description. The SPAR program will be a four-week cycle that moves in the order of the letters of the acronym: Week one will focus on identifying strengths and interventions to broaden and build those strengths, week two will focus on doing the same for positive relationships, and so on. The final week will then culminate with information and interventions to build resilience.
This last week will fall immediately before the students enter their exam period, ideally providing students with some techniques to cope with the pressure they feel. The entire program is planned to work as 90-minute sessions one time a week, and peer partners will be assigned at the beginning of the first week. These partners of similar age and station will stay together throughout. Peer-partners will allow for proper recognition and support as participants move through the program. This plan will frame out SPAR while outlining the first week of the program in detail with suggested interventions for strength-spotting and strength-building.

**Part II. Focusing on the “S” in SPAR—Self-Efficacy through Character Strengths**

**Step 1: Enable participants to identify their strengths—creating awareness**

*assignment.* When enrolling, each participant should be given instructions to come to the first 90-minute session after having taken the VIA Strengths Survey available for free at [www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org). This will help each participant identify his or her signature strengths and will form the basis from which well-being can be discussed and enhanced through targeted interventions.

Meta-analytic research findings suggest that positive psychology interventions that involve a ‘shotgun’ approach, in which individuals regularly practice multiple positive activities, may be more effective than engaging in only one activity (e.g., Seligman et al., 2005), and therefore educators are likely to see the most benefit overall to students’ well-being by adopting such an approach (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Thus, there is a rationale for the development of a general character strengths-based intervention program, based on the entire VIA strengths classification, enabling students to identify, explore, and apply their strengths.

We recommend that students begin the first 90-minute session by being introduced to the VIA strength survey, which they would have already taken, then moving to the students
answering questions about what it is, how it was developed, and why it matters (Appendix B). Staff could also introduce specific VIA strengths to the students, maybe using video clips from movies or stories from student and staff experiences at Ashoka etc.

**Step 2: Strengths and self-efficacy- students set goals based on strengths through exploration assignment:** After having identified signature strengths and learning about the VIA survey, students get a detailed introduction to Character strengths (see slide deck, Appendix D). Students can then learn to explore their strengths by setting strength-based goals.

Goals and goal-setting have a reciprocal relationship with self-efficacy and strengths. Linley et al., (2010) explored the connections between strengths use, goal progress, psychological needs, and well-being, and found that those who used their signature strengths ultimately made more progress on their goals, met their basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence and were higher in overall well-being. Therefore, by learning about their strengths, students can set more practical and achievable goals or modify goal attainment plan according to one’s strengths.

**Goal-Setting.** Students would be asked to select a character strength that most represents them, that is, their signature strengths (usually in the top 5 to 8 strengths according the VIA survey). They will then proceed to interview each other (in pairs) about that particular strength, using a specified list of questions (e.g. “When did you use this strength in the past?” “How does it feel when you use the strength?,” “What is its application to a future best self?,” “How do you use it at the most difficult/best times?,” etc.). As a team, they can then help one another make SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and have a time-frame), keeping in mind their strengths, to manage workload and stresses. Through this activity, students can increase awareness of their strengths and the domains in which they use them and also support
each other to build their strengths. Since Ashoka wants to move toward preventive measures to ward off depression, anxiety and stress, research shows that building strengths like hope, kindness, social intelligence, self-control, and perspective can buffer against the negative effects of stress and trauma, preventing or mitigating disorders (Park, 2004). For the student dealing with high-pressure situations, it is important to be able to face adversity without breaking down or giving up.

**Intervention 1: Imagining one’s best possible self.** Students will be instructed as follows: “Take a moment to imagine a future in which you are bringing your best possible self forward. Visualize a ‘best possible self” that is very pleasing to you and that you are interested in. Imagine you have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing your life goals. You might think of this as the realization of your life dreams and of your own best potentials. The point is not to think of unrealistic fantasies, rather, things that are positive, attainable, and within reason. After you get a fairly clear image, write about the details below. Writing your thoughts and hopes down helps to create a logical structure and helps you move from the realm of foggy ideas and fragmented thoughts to concrete, real possibilities. Be sure to write about the character strengths that you observe in this image. Also, what character strengths will you employ to make this best possible self a reality?”

Research shows this is a useful exercise in helping individuals with goal-setting and building optimism and hope. Among youth, the use of signature strengths in novel ways along with personally meaningful goal-setting led to increases in student engagement and hope (Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011).
Step 3: Students are assigned specific interventions—application of knowledge through strengths based interventions. Students now learn of a specific intervention to help them meet their self-chosen SMART goals—Using Strengths in New Ways.

Strengths-based interventions are highly empowering and motivating, and give people control and confidence; they work on the premise that people have abilities and internal resources that can be utilized to achieve remarkable outcomes, when understood and applied correctly. Peterson (2006) noted that research to date has demonstrated that the consequences and correlates of character strengths are positive in nature and therefore “the implication is that we should develop and use as many strengths of character as possible” (p. 157). Positive psychological interventions and activities (in general) have been shown to significantly enhance wellbeing and decrease depressive symptoms (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Further, as it is not assumed that character strengths “are fixed or necessarily grounded in immutable biogenetic characteristics” (Peterson, 2006, p. 139), it is reasonable to assume that, if not fostered, strengths may be lost over the course of development. Thus, the 90-minute weekly sessions at Ashoka are based on the Aware, Explore, Apply model (Niemic, 2009). More specifics can be found regarding the model in Appendix C.

Intervention 2-Using signature strengths in new ways. Students will have already taken the VIA Survey and have identified top character strengths. Students would have also set goals using specific or signature strengths that they want to develop. They will be further instructed in this step of the program as follows: “Consider the character strengths that are highest on your list and ask yourself if the character strengths feel like the ‘real you,’ are energizing for you to use, whether others would identify you as having the strength, and whether
you exhibit the strength a lot of the time in different domains of your life. People generally have at least five ‘signature’ strengths to which these qualities apply.”

“Choose one signature strength. Use it in a new way each day. Find different ways to express the character strength each day. For example, if kindness is one of your signature strengths- on day one you could use this strength by donating to a charity, on day two, you could help a friend with school work, on day three, you could reach out to someone in need and so on. Keep going with the exercise whether it feels energizing and authentic, or whether it feels awkward (which it might, as it is something new). Stick with the practice with one of your signature strengths for at least a week. Then choose another signature strength and apply it in a new and different way each day.”

Using one’s signature strengths in a new way has been shown to increase happiness and decrease depression for six months in some studies (Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012; Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2013), and it has been shown to decrease depression for three months in others (Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012). Furthermore, research among adults has shown that identifying and using signature strengths in a new way every day is an intervention that has been systematically tested and shown to have lasting effects on happiness (Seligman et al., 2005).

Part III. Developing Resilience—How (S)PAR Leads to Resilience

After building self-efficacy through strengths, the remaining parts of SPAR are positive relationships, attention and resilience. Here we provide brief overview of each of these components remembering that the overall goal of SPAR is resilience. There is more work to be done in these three areas. Therefore, this is a somewhat telegraphic summary when compared to the discussion above on strengths.
The pioneering work in self-efficacy has been done by Bandura (1977, 1982) and can be linked to four sources: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (Banruda, 1977). In particular, the ability to imagine future consequences in thought can provide a background for cognitive changes in motivation. Performance accomplishments are exactly what the student knows from prior attempts. For YIF Fellows, this could be their previous academic performance in undergraduate work. Vicarious experience could be the example of other Fellows or YIF alums who have a similar background and finished the program successfully. Verbal persuasion includes both the self-talk that motivates or the encouragement of others. Finally, the physiological states can often be enhanced by methods of relaxation and focus (e.g., meditation) and the methods noted under resilience below. Sometimes methods used to reduce phobias and anxiety, such as desensitization and cognitive behavioral strategies, can be used. In its simplest form, this may take on the disputation of “facts” which cannot be backed up (Seligman, 1990). In a university setting, an example of this could be a test-anxiety-reduction workshop. We point the reader to a general reference (Reivich & Shatté, 2002) on resilience for additional methods of enhancing self-efficacy.

Positive relationships are part of PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment) first written about by Seligman (2011) as making up the components of positive psychology. The idea of positive relationships is summed up in Chris Peterson’s three-word summary of positive psychology, “other people matter” (Peterson, 2006). Peterson’s work has an entire chapter on positive relationships including appropriate exercises. One of the most useful methods of enhancing relationships is to use active-constructive (and not passive or destructive) responding to others. This is based on the work of Gable, Reis, Impett, and Asher.
(2004), in which people are encouraged to respond actively, constructively, and with enthusiasm to the verbal expression of others as a way to enhance social bonds. It is a simple method to try and could benefit Ashoka students. Another experiment to engage positive relationships is to perform random acts of kindness (Seligman, 1990).

Meditation may be helpful for Ashoka Fellows and students who have a hard time focusing and bringing their attention to their required level to read assignments of moderate to long lengths. One of us has had the experience in YIF where a small number of Fellows have difficulty concentrating for 15 minutes or more on a given reading assignment. Research by Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, and Davidson (2008) note the effects of focused-attention meditation on well-being. Smally and Winston (2010) explicitly note the usefulness of meditation for assisting attention and report on the positive effect of meditation on symptoms of ADHD. Even short-term meditation can yield improvement in attention (Tang, et al., 2008).

The ultimate goal of SPAR is to help build resilience, which can be learned and can protect individuals by reducing the harmful effects of stress, buffering them against depression and anxiety, and providing them with constructive ways to react to challenges and conflict (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Resilient students will bounce back from adversity, growing and learning to thrive in the face of challenges (Carver, 1998; Tugade & Frederickson, 2004; Tugade, Fredrickson, & Barrett, 2004). By learning new ways of thinking, students can increase their resiliency, which is consistent with findings from Fredrickson’s well-known broaden and build model (Fredrickson, 2013). Perhaps the most useful methods of building resilience involve the work of Seligman (1990) and Reivich and Shatté (2002) in the development of the ABC (activating event, belief and consequence) method. In addition, Reivich and Shatté (2002) note a number of methods, such as how to avoid thinking traps, finding icebergs, challenging beliefs,
putting it into perspective, and fast resilience skills that can enhance resilience. These methods originate in cognitive behavioral therapy and have been demonstrated to be useful in a number of venues ranging from the US Army to educational settings.

**Schedule.** The schedule we propose is in keeping with the five-week YIF semesters. We anticipate this program to run for four of those five weeks given the need to study for exams in the last week. Below in Table 1 is a sample place for a given semester. This or an extended plan could also be used for undergraduates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>SPAR Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5 hrs.</td>
<td>S - Strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5 hrs.</td>
<td>P – Positive Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5 hrs.</td>
<td>A - Attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.5 hrs.</td>
<td>R - Resilience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Schedule for SPAR at Ashoka.

**Part IV. Conclusion**

Ashoka’s SPAR program in totality will aim to build optimism, teach skills to improve relationships, and enhance mental functioning through various strategies aimed at increasing resilience (K. Reivich & J. Saltzberg, personal communication, February 12, 2017; Reivich & Shatté, 2002).
Appendix A—Metrics

SPAR aims to build self-efficacy, positive relationships, attention, and resilience. Since we suggested a pilot program using SPAR with focus on interventions to build resilience, it would be most beneficial to assign the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale prior to the first session and after the last session to track any measurable differences. We believe the counselors facilitating the programs could collect the pre and post surveys to note any changes in resiliency.

Measuring Resilience. The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) was developed as a brief self-rated assessment to help quantify resilience and to clinically measure treatment response. It was constructed to establish reference values for resilience in the general population and in clinical samples (Connor & Davidson, 2003). The content of the scale was drawn from a number of components found to determine resilience, enhancing the validity of the test. With this in mind, the survey focuses on the construct of hardiness, with items reflecting control, commitment, change viewed as challenge, SMART goals, action orientation, strong self-esteem/confidence, adaptability when coping with change, social problem solving skills, humor in the face of stress, taking on responsibilities for dealing with stress, secure/stable relationships, and previous experiences of success and achievement (Connor & Davidson, 2003). We suggest the Connor-Davidson resilience scale be administered twice, once in the beginning of the semester, and once at the end, prior to and following students’ participation in the SPAR workshop sessions.

Measuring Self-efficacy: For metrics regarding self-efficacy, the work of Bandura is again noted (Bandura, 2006) which has a number of examples. For Ashoka, the easiest way to assess self-efficacy is a six-question online form (Chen, Gully & Eden, 2001):
If there is interest in measuring improvement in self-efficacy beliefs in addition to improvement in resilience, we suggest this survey be used by students once before they begin with the session on strengths and once after the completion of all four sessions of SPAR.

**Measuring Positive Relationships.** Compassionate Love Scale measures the tendency to support, help, and understand other people.

https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/testcenter

If there is interest in measuring improvement in relationships and social connections in addition to improvement in resilience, we suggest this survey be used by students once before they begin with the session on positive relationships and once after the completion of all four sessions of SPAR.

**Measuring Attention:** Schmertz & Anderson & Robins, (2009) Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale—Revised. Available at


Or Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills—Act with Awareness. Available at:

http://www.ruthbaer.com/academics/KIMS.pdf

If there is interest in measuring improvement in attention, focus and mindfulness, in addition to improvement in resilience, we suggest this survey be used by students once before they begin with the session on attention and once after the completion of all four sessions of SPAR.
These metrics are summarized in Table 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>Free?</th>
<th>Web-Based?</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Relationships</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td><a href="https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/testcenter">https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/testcenter</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ruthbaer.com/academics/KIMS.pdf">http://www.ruthbaer.com/academics/KIMS.pdf</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Metric details for SPAR at Ashoka.
Appendix B-What is the VIA Survey of Character Strengths?

The VIA Survey of Character Strengths is a simple self-assessment that takes less than 15 minutes and provides a wealth of information to help you understand your core characteristics. Most personality tests focus on negative and neutral traits, but the VIA Survey focuses on your best qualities.

Created in 2004 under the direction of Dr. Martin Seligman, the "father of Positive Psychology" and author of Authentic Happiness and Flourish, and Dr. Christopher Peterson, distinguished scientist at the University of Michigan and author of A Primer in Positive Psychology, and validated by Robert McGrath, Ph.D., the VIA Survey is regarded as a central tool of positive psychology and has been used in hundreds of research studies and taken by over 3 million people in over 190 countries resulting in better workplaces, schools, teams the world over.

The VIA Classification of Character Strengths is comprised of 24 character strengths that fall under six broad virtue categories: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence. See Fig. 2. Each one of us possess all 24 of the VIA character strengths in varying degrees making up our own unique profiles. They are morally and universally valued, encompass our capacities for helping ourselves and others and produce positive effects when we express them. Knowing your constellation of character strengths is the first step towards living a happier, more authentic life.
Fig. 2. Virtues (left-hand column) and associated character strengths.
Appendix C—Aware, Explore, Apply Model (Niemic, 2009)

The following three-step process provides a larger framework for working with strengths and is the basis for the structure of the proposed SPAR program at Ashoka University.

1.) **Aware**: The first step of any change process – whether this be self-directed change or therapist-supported change – is awareness. This crucial step involves getting the language of strengths down and seeing some of the labels as being attributed to oneself. This step answers the question, “What are my strengths?” and begins to answer the question, “What strength was I just using?”

2.) **Explore**: This is the phase in which the student connects the strength labels in a deeper way to their past and current experiences. It begins to shed some light on who the student really is and what really makes them tick. This step involves solitary reflection, pondering, and journaling, as well as interpersonal discussion and co-exploration. When in pairs, students ask their partners questions about a strength you observe in them or about any of the 24 strengths in their VIA Survey results. Exploratory questions could include - How do the results fit for you? What is your gut reaction? What surprises you most about the results? Do the top five resonate for you as signature strengths? In other words, do you feel these are the core of who you are and that the strengths give you energy when you practice them? When have you used that (curiosity, fairness) strength in the past? When you think about a time when you were functioning at your best, which strengths did you use? When you think of a time when you were anxious, depressed, or highly stressed, which strengths did you use to move forward? Consider your past or current mentors (or role models or paragons). What strengths did they embody? How did they express them?

3.) **Apply**: This step involves the student beginning to use their strengths in their daily life. This is the action phase. The student moves from reflecting and thinking to doing. The partner might
start with the question, “Which strength are you interested in applying in your daily life?”

Another angle is to directly point out themes that have emerged in the exploration questions: the student might point out that hope and perseverance seem to keep popping up in discussions, that the student seems to use self-regulation well at school but not at home, or the theme that the student frequently overuses their curiosity and under-uses their creativity. After both the students have become more acquainted with their strengths of character (awareness) and have reflected on your past, current, and future usage of your strengths (exploration), the next step is to create a strengths action plan (application).
Appendix D—Slide Deck for First Session on Strengths
SPAR Road Map

• Goal of Project
• Context: Education in India & Ashoka University
• What is SPAR?
• Strengths
• Positive Relationships/Attention/Resilience
• Take-Aways
Goal

• Enhance resilience of Ashoka students in a challenging environment
• Some methods may be applicable to faculty and staff

SPAR Road Map

• Goal of Project
• Context: Education in India & Ashoka University
• What is SPAR?
• Strengths
• Positive Relationships/Attention/Resilience
• Take-Aways
Context: Education in India

Context: Ashoka University

Educating India’s Future Leaders
Ashoka University: Programs, Faculty & Students

- India’s first non-profit liberal arts university in the Delhi capital region
- Goal: Top-tier, world-class liberal arts institution
- 925 students
- Received 7000 applicants for 550 seats
- 50+ full-time faculty from India, UK & US
- Already recognized as premier university for humanities and social sciences

Ashoka University: Infrastructure & Vision

- Launched India’s largest collective philanthropy effort with 87 Founders, investing in India’s future
- Built 700,000+ sq. ft. of world-class infrastructure for ideal learning and living environment
- Aspires to transform higher education in India
- Offers ability to shape liberal arts curriculum to prepare students to the challenges of the 21st century
Ashoka University: Construction Phases

- Phase 1 - $20 M
  Sep 2012 – Aug 2014

- Phase 2 - $20 M
  Sep 2014 – Aug 2016

- Phase 3 - $20 M
  Sep 2016 – Aug 2018

- Phase 4 - $30 M
  Sep 2018 – Aug 2020

• Four Phases – cost 100 million USD
SPAR Road Map

- Goal of Project
- Context: Education in India & Ashoka University
- What is SPAR?
- Strengths
  - Positive Relationships/Attention/Resilience
- Take-Aways

SPAR Overview
Building Resilience @ Ashoka

- Resilience
- Attention
- Positive Relationships
- Strengths
What is the SPAR Program?

- Pilot Program for needs of Ashoka’s Centre of Well-Being:
  - Increases well-being through:
    - Self-Awareness
    - Self-Efficacy
    - Self-Regulation
    - Self-care
    - Peer Relationships

What’s In a Name?

- **SPAR**-to make motions of attack and defense in boxing (www.dictionary.com)
- Catchy acronym
- Marketable
  - “SPAR against depression”
  - “Well-being is worth fighting for”
  - “SPAR-ing for your health”
  - “SPAR towards Success”
What is SPAR?

Building Resilience in Students

How will SPAR work?

- 90-minute sessions once a week
- 4-week duration to coincide with 5-week semesters
- Stand Alone Intervention Components
  - Customizable for Ashoka’s community
  - Offer more popular sessions more often based on pilot program findings

How Will We Know?

- Does SPAR build resilience?
  - What: Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale
Literature Review Findings

Character Strengths
• Increases self-awareness, thereby strengthening self-efficacy beliefs (Govindji & Linley, 2007)

• Positive Relationships
  • Strongly linked to well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, Haidt, 2006)

Literature Review Findings

Attention and Mindfulness
• Intention
• Attention
• Attitude
[Niemiec & Lissing, 2016]

Resilience
Protects against stress
Buffers against depression and anxiety
Provide constructive ways to react to challenges and conflict
[Reivich & Shatte, 2002]
SPAR Road Map

- Goal of Project
- Context: Education in India & Ashoka University
- What is SPAR?

- Character Strengths
- Positive Relationships/Attention/Resilience
- Take-Aways

What are Character Strengths?

Character strengths are people’s core characteristics that determine how they think, feel and behave

[Park & Peterson, 2009]
What is the VIA Strengths Survey?

- Uses 24 universally recognized strengths and organizes them under a set of six higher order virtues—wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence
- Helps determine our signature strengths (top 5 to 8)
- Gives rank order of character strengths from 1 to 24
- Created by Peterson and Seligman in 2004
- Free
- 3 million people in over 190 countries

Next Step – Character Strengths-Based Approach (A-E-A)

1. Aware
   - Take VIA Survey
   - Receive introduction
   - Understand each SS
   - Understand reactions
   - Confirm SS

2. Explore
   - When you at your best
   - Past, current, future use
   - Expand
   - Explore a challenge using a strengths lens

3. Apply
   - Behavioral activation
   - Interventions
   - Align with life goals
   - Set strength goals
   - Appreciate strength

[Adapted from Niemiec, 2017; © 2011-2017, VIA Institute on Character]
Strengths Based Applications

- Strengths-based interventions are highly empowering and motivating
- Give people control & confidence
- Work on premise that people have abilities

Strengths and Goal Setting

- **Activity** – In pairs, students help one another make based on strengths **SMART goals**

  [Latham, 2003]

- We experience greater happiness when we reach goals based on values and interests

  [Sheldon & Kasser, 1998]
Suggested Intervention

- Best possible future self
  - Helps with goal-setting, building optimism & hope
- Using strengths in new ways
  - Increased happiness and decreased depression for 6 months

SPAR Road Map

- Goal of Project
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- What is SPAR?
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  - Positive Relationships/Attention/Resilience
- Take-Aways
• Positive Relationships
• Attention
• Resilience

• How do we make sure our strengths are on par with our expectations?

Positive Relationships

• It’s really all about the ACRONYMS!
• PERMA
  [Seligman, 2011]
• OPM
  [Peterson, 2006]
• ACR
  [Gable, Reis, Impett, and Asher, 2004]
• RAK
  [Seligman, 1990]
• MAPP ;)
  [Yay, MAPP.12!]
Attention

- Mindfulness/Meditation
- Effects on well-being
  - [Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, and Davidson, 2008]]
- Improves attention
  - [Tang, et al., 2008]
- Ameliorates ADHD
  - [Smally and Winston, 2010]
- Meets specific needs of Ashoka Fellows

The Art of Bouncing Back

- The ultimate goal of SPAR is to help build resilience: reduce the harmful effects of stress, buffer against depression and anxiety, and provide constructive ways to respond to challenges and conflict…
References


Ashoka University (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.ashoka.edu.in


Tugade, M. M., Fredrickson, B. L., & Barrett, L. F. (2004, December). Psychological resilience and positive emotional granularity: Examining the benefits of positive emotions on


WHO (2016) Suicide data. Retrieved from