

Food for Thought

Form and Function: Positive Psychology and Spa

PART TWO IN A THREE PART SERIES ON *WHAT'S NEXT?*

by Colleen Dunn Smith

It is an early June morning and Arizona is experiencing a fairly mild spring. However upon receiving an email regarding IPPA's (International Positive Psychology Association) First World Congress convening in the city of brotherly love – Philadelphia, Pennsylvania – I decide to attend, leaving this springtime splendor in favor of the lush green and rain soaked forests of the Northeast. With only one and a half weeks until the conference (June 18-21), I employ well-planned spontaneity and my agenda quickly forms. (I like to be spontaneous...just as long as I have time to plan for it.) I tack on a few extra days to connect with some friends and colleagues – some of New England's top spa professionals – and tour their spas, making the most of my time and location.

As I make these plans, questions fill my mind: What can I learn from this particular branch of psychology which focuses on such issues as the empirical study of positive emotions, strengths-based character, and healthy institutions? How can I integrate these scientific findings into today's spa programs to enhance our understanding of the Body Mind Spirit connection? Will this support my overall mission to bring Empowerment ideals into the spa curriculum? Will I be able to find a Starbucks when I want one? Hey, I'm just trying to prioritize.

I also want to meet and network with other Life and Business Coaches to learn how they incorporate Positive Psychology tenants into their work, as well as how they garner new business.

My agenda and my love of learning at full throttle, I set out with anticipation and enthusiasm, and I discover what it's all about, Alfie.

Positive Psychology (PP) is the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. This field is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play. (Martin Seligman, 2007) This fits perfectly with what I know and understand about Empowerment ideals and also with traditional spa philosophy's psychological component, one of the four pillars to total well-being. (Healthy nutrition, regular exercise, and care of the face and body comprise the other three.)

PP study encompasses the past, present and future of individual personal well-being through to the collective conscious where individuals move toward better citizenship. At its core, PP differs from mid-twentieth century psychology in that it doesn't focus on what is wrong with us i.e. mental illness, disease and disorder. Instead it focuses on what makes us healthy and strong and why we thrive and flourish. Think prevention with built-in resilience, and a proactive approach on building competency, to find and nurture strengths. The goal of Positive Psychology is to rise above the line of equilibrium where we are simply without disease. PP wants us to cross over that line into the realm of Optimal Health and Well-being to Flourishing. Read and follow the blog at Happier.com on *Positive Psychology: No Longer Just the Study of Happiness: Positive Education, Positive Health and Flourishing*.

In Barbara Frederickson's book "Positivity: The Path to Flourishing" she states her scientific findings on positive emotions. Emotions, even when heartfelt, come and go. Transient in nature, we can't make them last forever, but we can increase their frequency in our lives. Her research reveals that in order to counter the

effect of just one negative emotion or experience, we need three positive ones to keep moving forward. She asserts that this 3:1 ratio is vital to flourishing. Read more at www.PositivtyRatio.com.

How does all this apply to spa? It is our invitation to bring the science of flourishing into our everyday lives, from building employee relations to enhancing guest experience. However, this science also asserts that in order to truly *Flourish*, we must look beyond feeling good to doing good, not only for ourselves and our clients, but our community. At the end of the conference the founder of Positive Psychology, Martin Seligman, Ph.D., in his closing comments challenged us with a goal...for 51% of the population to be flourishing by 2051! As a natural gateway to reach people seeking better living, spas hold the key to a very bright future indeed...now we just need to use it.