

3. Psychological Capital (PsyCap)

How can one reach a high level of performance that includes well-being and satisfaction and that supports personal growth? Positive Psychology offers the following answers – and thus gives us some important places to begin:

Be a HERO! – How? By discovering and strengthening ...



Fig. 12: Psychological Capital (HERO)

What is Psychological Capital?

The concept of Psychological Capital (PsyCap for short) has an important place in recent research. The term refers to a psychological model that lays out the factors related to growth and development. The concept originated with Fred Luthans et al. (2004), who – building on the work of the pioneering U.S.-American psychologist Martin Seligman (mentioned above) – offered the following definition: PsyCap signifies the exploration and implementation of positively-oriented human resources, strengths and mental abilities, which can be developed in such a way as to increase performance and overall personal satisfaction. These can be more easily influenced than such aspects as intelligence or personality traits and are more stable than emotions or moods.

As illustrated above (Fig. 12), the acronym HERO lays out the components of PsyCap, which turn out to be important predictors of personal effectiveness. In other words, these factors influence how well we perform. Moreover, positive connections have been shown to exist between PsyCap and both well-being and satisfaction (Lermer 2019). But PsyCap is more than pure theory: it is empirically grounded in stress research and Positive Psychology, and has been investigated for a number of years now, both in the context of work and in school.

Additional studies (e.g. Finch et al. 2020) have suggested that PsyCap constitutes an important entry point for helping children and young people learn to build up the resources that contribute to well-being and a positive development – which in turn makes it possible to absorb mental pressures. Despite significant advances in research, many questions remain; but evidence continues to accumulate that suggests a positive correlation between PsyCap and motivation, readiness, well-being and success in learning. Each of the HERO components shown above represents an effective lever in this regard. Research on PsyCap initiatives in the workplace suggests that such programs, supporting one or more HERO components, may be even more effective than programs that focus purely on resilience training, for example (ibid.). Researchers assume that we can develop at least 40% of our PsyCap through practice. Thus, our Psychological Capital is malleable, and there is little reason for fatalism or the belief that our potential is genetically so predetermined that there is no room for development. On the contrary!

The four HERO components are defined as follows:

Hope

In everyday usage we often mean with *hope* something that we cannot influence ourselves: *I hope that it won't rain on the day of our field trip*. Or we simply do not make use of the possibilities for influencing an outcome: *I didn't study, but I still hope I'll get a decent grade on the assignment*. In the PsyCap model, hope is understood as trusting in one's own capacities, setting attainable goals and aiming for them with confidence. Out of hope can arise motivation – for example, to learn a language – as well as resilience. Hope means being positively motivated and searching with confidence for appropriate pathways toward one's envisioned goals – and investing the necessary energy for initiating and maintaining one's movement toward these goals. Hope, defined as the optimistic expectation that one's efforts will pay off, constitutes an important personal resource.

Efficacy

In the scientific literature, the term efficacy is often expanded to self-efficacy, which expresses more clearly the idea of a resource that can be influenced by the person herself. Unlike people with a low expectation of self-efficacy, those with a high self-efficacy tend to be conscious of their various competencies and skills. They trust in their ability to bring their skills and their knowledge to bear in pursuing a set goal in such a way that the goal can be reached with an appropriate amount of effort. High self-efficacy also tends to be associated with a greater

willingness to exert oneself and a greater capacity to perform, while with lower self-efficacy one often sees a more limited endurance when it comes to dealing with challenging tasks, a quicker lapse into discouragement when things do not go well, and a higher susceptibility to phobias and depression.

Self-efficacy can be stabilized and strengthened through experiences of success, through learning from models, through feedback and, possibly, through *private speech* (Radack et al. 2020, Kötter 2016): children in kindergarten and early pre-school often talk to themselves, and this self-directed speech is by no means without purpose. Formulations are repeated or various steps in the completion of tasks are described and commented upon; goals are explicitly named. Speaking out loud can lift a burden from the working memory, while one's own thoughts become more accessible by being articulated. Moreover, one can motivate oneself and encourage oneself to stay on task. In this way, *private speech* can support the attainment of goals – which in turn has a positive effect on self-efficacy.

It stands to reason that *private speech* can also contribute to language learning, especially in terms of seeking formulations, testing out speech, etc., and yet it is most often suppressed among both adolescents and adults. There has so far been little evidence to suggest that this suppression is always necessary or, more importantly, constructive. On the contrary, recent findings suggest that speaking while thinking can be helpful, and that speaking while learning (a language, for example), leads “unlike silent practice, to significantly higher retention” (Kötter 2022: 205).

Resilience

This HERO component was explored at length in the previous chapter of this handbook (cf. Chap. 2); here, we will build on that discussion to situate resilience in the framework of PsyCap growth and development factors. As a HERO component, resilience comprises those resources that enable a person to remain mentally robust and to overcome obstacles even under adverse circumstances. As such, they increase one's chances of success. Resilient people are as a rule able to recover quickly from significant challenges. Obviously, there are connections between resilience and self-efficacy, self-esteem and even the quality of one's friendships.

Studies on so-called *academic burnout* – that is, the exhaustion felt by young people at school or university – point toward the particular importance of resilience as a protective factor (Radack et al. 2022). Burnout among children and youth can manifest itself not only as exhaustion

Academic Burnout

(key symptoms: exhaustion,
cynicism, deteriorating
performance)

**Boosting resilience
helps and protects.**

but also as self-distancing and refusal to participate in class, declining academic performance, rudeness toward parents and teachers, as well as general cynicism. Exhaustion, cynicism, and declining performance are considered the three core features of academic burnout. The portion of adolescents affected varies from study to study depending on the age of the participants, but one can safely assume that around one-third of all learners are affected to some degree. As correlation studies have shown, strong resilience reduces the risk of developing academic burnout. An early, even preventative, strengthening of resilience, possibly together with other HERO components, would appear to be an especially promising and meaningful intervention. But because the young brain is highly adaptive – indeed, it is completely restructured and optimized throughout adolescence and into the early adult years – it should by no means be assumed that later measures for strengthening resilience would be useless. Not at all! And there is another factor that can reduce the risk of academic burnout: enthusiastic teachers with a positive attitude (on the importance of enthusiasm in the classroom, cf. Chap. 4).

Optimism

By this, we mean a core attitude of self-assurance. Optimistic people look to the future with positive expectations. When they are striving toward something, they tend to expect favorable rather than unfavorable developments – even when not all circumstances are optimal. Using the concept of realistic optimism, we can distinguish a basic orientation that is positive without being unrealistic from a naive optimism that has little to do with reality. Our handbook takes realistic optimism as its reference point.

But the concept of optimism, despite this definition, may remain unclear for some readers. Above all, distinguishing optimism from self-efficacy is not easy at first glance. It is helpful to view optimism as a basic or fundamental attitude, while self-efficacy is the ability to assess each individual challenge in the mirror of one's own competences. Through studies involving school-aged participants, optimism has been identified as an important predictor of, among other things, academic success and well-being (Finch et al. 2020).

Do Not Underestimate Optimism!

It would seem that the importance of optimism is vastly underestimated – possibly because our knowledge of it is quite new. If one considers the effects of the HERO components individually, then optimism often turns out to be one of the most important. For example, it is the strongest predictor of personal flourishing (cf. Chap. 4) – stronger than hope, self-efficacy and even resilience. We also have evidence to suggest that an increase in optimism reduces fear (Finch et al. 2020). While this is also true of self-efficacy, the effect is weaker.

Considered in light of these findings, optimism appears to be especially worthy of note among the HERO components – or at least, more noteworthy than has been thought till now. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the four HERO components if taken together offer greater potential than any individual component fostered in isolation.

And yet there are many programs that focus on individual components, especially resilience (cf. Chap. 2). This likely has something to do with, on the one hand, practicability: the conception of offerings that promote resilience has been found to be doable from a practical point of view. On the other hand, there is the question of what lends itself to being researched. Effects can often only be demonstrated when a program focuses on a single aspect; otherwise, it is difficult to say, from a scientific point of view, which aspect is the actual cause of an observed effect. Be that as it may, several studies have shown that it is possible to increase optimism through appropriate interventions, albeit the effects are variously strong depending on the kind of program offered. For example, online programs have shown significantly weaker effects than those involving encounters in person (Malouff & Schutte 2017; a similar result is evident with resilience-focused programs). Moreover, programs that focus on goal setting and visualizing the best-possible future developments seem to have particularly strong results. In foreign language class, this could be a very nice speaking or writing prompt, in which an actual goal is pursued.

For increasing realistic optimism and individual motivation, we can use WOOP (Oettingen 2015), a mental strategy and technique for realizing goals. WOOP is an acronym for Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, and Plan.

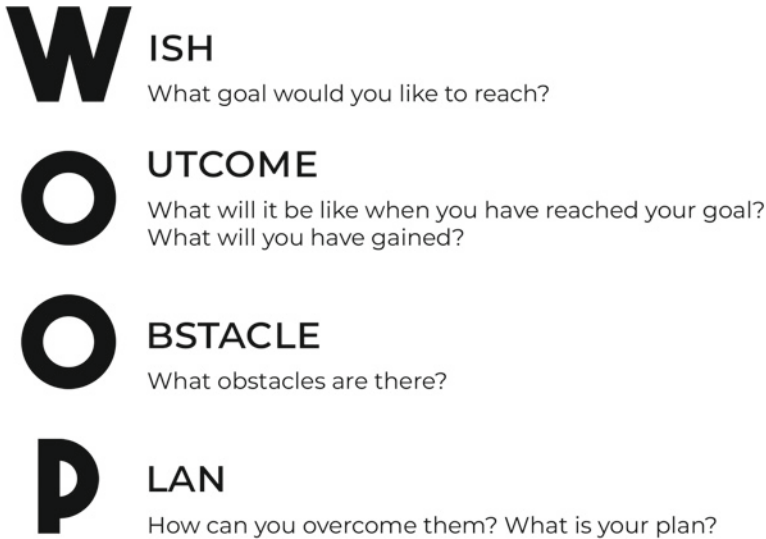


Fig. 13: With WOOP to More Realistic Optimism, Motivation and Goal-Orientedness (adapted from Oettingen 2015)

The WOOP technique has been recommended in a wide variety of contexts in recent years, particularly the workplace. Less familiar is its use by parents, teachers and students, although the technique's originator, the psychologist Gabriele Oettingen, describes it as extremely effective in this context ("WOOP works miracles", 2015: 7).

It is important in the implementation, however, to hold to the sequence of steps (Fig. 13). One begins with a wish, an intention, a goal that one wants to reach. This is step 1. With step 2, the point is to imagine the positive benefit of reaching the goal, and to make this image as vivid as possible. In this way, the wish or goal is made concrete and specific and the positive benefits of reaching the goal are made clear in the mind's eye: this serves as motivation for the corresponding action, which is necessary in order to turn these positive images into something real. Because most pathways toward a desired goal involve some sort of obstacle, step 3 asks us to consider what those obstacles are likely to be. Step 4, then, ensures that we make an appropriate plan aimed at recognizing and overcoming the obstacle or obstacles that stand between us and our goal. Steps 3 and 4 thus help guard against setting out toward our goal in naive optimism, assuming there will be no appreciable obstacles, challenges or setbacks, only to be caught by surprise when they do crop up, and in the worst case, to lose courage and call it quits.

In the context of learning a foreign language, students can use the WOOP strategy for numerous different goals, for example, learning vocabulary. The wish (step 1) might be: *I want to have the vocabulary for Unit 5 under my belt by Friday*. A positive benefit (step 2) of this might be the ability to participate more in class, or to get a good grade on a test, etc. Obstacles (step 3) can arise if the time to study gets frittered away on other things, or if certain vocabulary words prove more difficult to memorize at first. The solution for overcoming these obstacles (step 4) could be e.g. drawing up a work plan with times for studying as well as portions of content, plus the targeted selection and deployment of techniques for memorization – such as those presented at the end of this chapter under the rubric *Get Busy!*

WOOP represents a systematic process with a coherent sequence of easily followed steps toward a goal. It increases the likelihood of experiencing success and of embracing and overcoming challenges. At the same time, it contributes to realistic optimism in the sense of a confident fundamental attitude.

The fact that our fundamental attitudes, expectations, feelings and thoughts can in fact influence us has been demonstrated not only in studies on the HERO components but also in studies using placebos. In these studies, one group of participants is typically given an active substance (*verum*), while another group is given something that looks exactly the same but that contains no active ingredients (*placebo*). The effects can thus be measured without regard to the groupings, since the participants themselves do not know whether they are in the verum group or the placebo group. Occasionally, side-effects arise – and not only in the group of those who in fact received the verum. Effects that arise in the participants who only received the placebo and not the actual drug are presumably the result of something else: expectations and the power of thoughts. These are often called the *placebo effect*. Likewise, apparent side-effects that arise from placebos are dubbed the *nocebo effect*. Both effects demonstrate in a remarkable way that thoughts, expectations and attitudes have a strong influence on the body. The architecture of the brain itself is thus formed not only by our actions and experiences but also by our thoughts. Someone who is constantly afraid or who gets stuck in negative thought loops will eventually solidify the fear-networks in the brain. The opposite is also true, however: positive thoughts, confidence and optimism likewise leave traces in the brain and can contribute to a favorable handling of challenges. By regularly deploying strategies such as WOOP, or going through the activities presented here in *Happy Learning*, learners can strengthen the HERO in themselves, while parents and teachers can offer meaningful support. In addition to exploring the activities and strategies, such things as offering feedback can play an important role – either beneficially as *blessing* or harmfully as *curse*.

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