THE PROGRAMME; What we did

Positive has collaborated with Charlie Waller Memorial Trust (CWMT) and the University of Reading to develop and deliver the Positive Minds pilot programme to 150 university students across the 2016/17 academic year. The programme provided students with evidence-based cognitive and behavioural tools and techniques to manage pressure and build psychological resilience. The programme’s aim was to support students’ transition from school to university, help them to manage the pressures of university life, and develop the skills required to thrive in today’s workplace.

Benefits for students:
• Learn a range of adaptive psychological techniques and coping strategies that can help them to fulfil their potential, manage periods of pressure and decrease the likelihood of psychological ill health.
• Acquire adaptive life skills that can be used to better manage transitions and uncertainty.
• Develop emotional literacy to reduce stigma and shame associated with psychological ill health

The Programme Outline:
Introduction – This session introduced the importance of psychological wellbeing for sustaining high performance, presenting tools and techniques that could help students manage periods of stress, pressure and change. 500 students attended an introductory talk supported by the Positive App in October 2016. Following this, 150 students volunteered to attend a four module programme from January to April 2017.

See More – This session looked at ‘emotional literacy’ – understanding why and how we react to situations, particularly stressful ones.

Focus Deeper – Improving attentional focus is a crucial factor in achieving academic and career success; this session focused on being mindful and separating ‘useful’ and ‘useless’ worries.

Think Brighter – This session demonstrated how adopting a flexible cognitive style can enable more optimistic, positive patterns of thinking and behaviour.

Connect Better – This session introduced the knowledge and tools designed to increase positive emotional contagion and communication, enhancing trust, compassion and understanding.
59% of students reported feeling anxious, nervous or on edge on more than half of the days in the last two weeks, while 13% of students had felt this way nearly every day. This can lead to meta-emotion, where we become anxious about our levels of anxiety, or stressed about being stressed.

71% of students said that they couldn’t stop or control worrying for more than half the days in the previous fortnight, with 18% feeling this way almost every day. A primary aim of this programme was to provide them with tools and techniques to manage their worries and help them separate those which are useful from those which are not.

I feel excluded from groups around me.
56% of the students surveyed suffered from some degree of social exclusion. 28% of the students felt that this occurred ‘frequently,’ ‘most of the time’ or ‘all of the time’. Such negative feels can be self-perpetuating and may lead to students being less likely to engage socially over the long-term.

I feel really overworked a lot of the time and that I’m not getting enough rest, socialising and sleep.
‘My anxiety derives from people and my failure to initiate, let alone maintain, friendships. I go through my days speaking to no one and I feel envy when I see coursemates together and rue myself for not being a people person.’

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EMOTIONAL BAROMETER (EB)

The Emotional Barometer (EB) is an evidence-based visual metaphor tool designed to help build emotional literacy. It provides a pictorial representation of an individual's energy level and how this relates to their emotions, thoughts and behaviour and offers a means of tracking changes over time.

The EB is split into four quadrants. The right-hand quadrants represent positive energy and the left-hand quadrants negative energy. The top quadrants represent high energy and the bottom quadrants represent low energy.

When we enjoy positive emotional states, registering a position on the right-hand side of the EB, there is good evidence from neuroscience that our brain is ‘online’ and that our cognitive function is optimal. There are measurable improvements in a range of executive skills including concentration, memory, decision-making, innovation and creativity.

Because emotions are highly contagious, our moodstate can also have a profound effect on those around us. For students, this means their emotions can significantly impact those of their peers, tutors, family, housemates – anybody with whom they spend time at university.

When students are on the right-hand side of the EB they are more likely to engage with others and communicate with energy and enthusiasm. Whilst it is perfectly normal to move around the four quadrants, students on the left-hand side of the EB might find their discretionary effort, cognitive function or engagement with other people is affected. Being aware of these changes and the part that emotions play is key to maintaining overall wellbeing.

THE DATA SUMMARY

1453 total entries on the EB
125 users of the EB
INSIGHTS FROM THE EB

The insights collected from the Emotional Barometer entries are collated below. The graph with % shows the amount of entries that have been inputted from all students across the programme to date. The first graph indicates that students have spent the majority of their time in the bottom right quadrant, suggesting a reflective and relaxed mood state. They have spent least time in the top left, which is often associated with feelings of anger or frustration.

This graph splits the quadrants up into 16th. This shows that the majority of the students’ entries lie in the middle of the barometer and are close to the axes. There are far less entries in the most extreme parts of each quadrant.

EB ratio per month: the graph below shows how the number of positive (right-hand side) EB entries compares to negative (left-hand side) entries from December 2016 to May 2017.

EB ratio per week (Spring Term): this graph shows that the most positive week of the year was that commencing February 27th, followed by the week commencing February 6th. The most negative week was recorded as March 20th, the last week of term.
**WHY HERE? ENTRIES**

The App is central to an individual’s journey through Positive’s programmes. It offers on-demand access to tailored content and tools that help participants practise and embed their learning.

When students log their EB entries, they have the chance to add a reason why they placed their disc in that particular quadrant. The common themes around students’ moods or feelings are listed below, along with some key quotes from the students which outline the reasons behind their moodstates at the time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOP LEFT</th>
<th>TOP RIGHT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annoyed</strong></td>
<td><strong>Excited</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anxious</strong></td>
<td><strong>Positive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stressed</strong></td>
<td><strong>Energised</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Worried</strong></td>
<td><strong>Happy</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Many situations have caused the feeling to build up and now I’m panicking all the time.’
**Key reason why?** Assignments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BOTTOM LEFT</th>
<th>BOTTOM RIGHT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exhausted</strong></td>
<td><strong>Calm</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tired</strong></td>
<td><strong>Positive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sad</strong></td>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stressed</strong></td>
<td><strong>Relaxed</strong></td>
</tr>
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‘Difficult to concentrate. Thinking too many things at the same time. Low energy.’

‘I feel so happy today I feel like I accomplished something. I know this feeling can be transferred academically.’
**Key behavioural impact?** Productivity increase

‘Lots of things to look forward to, motivated after the new year, enjoying work at uni and social events.’
**IMPACT ANALYSIS**

To support the programme, Positive asked the students to fill in an evaluation survey two months after they had completed their modules. This consisted of both quantitative and qualitative questions. The results of the survey have been analysed to show the potential longitudinal impact that completing Positive Minds has had on the students at the University of Reading. The results below are collated from a total of 30 students.

**ANY OTHER COMMENTS ON THE IMPACT THAT POSITIVE MINDS HAS HAD ON YOU?**

- "I have a greater awareness of my emotional responses to others, and have dealt with stressful situations differently as a result of the programme."
- "100% of students surveyed would recommend Positive Minds to other students."
- "What are the most effective things you will take away from the programme?"
  - "Remaining calm under pressure - taking a step back."
  - "Better understanding of my relationships, empathy, reactions to others."

- "Qualitative content analysis highlighted the following the key themes as to why the students answered this way: their level of control over their worries, their awareness of what was useful and what was not useful to worry about, their increase in focus, their ability to reduce and/or cope with stress."
  - "Resilience is best when it comes from within"

- "Content analysis showed that techniques to avoid distraction were key to students improving their focus. These included mindfulness, being more positive in the way they speak to themselves about work and increasing their productivity, which in turn increased their motivation to focus on work."

- "Content analysis highlighted developing positive thinking techniques, spending more time reflecting and focusing on their strengths, and being able to normalise stress as commonly used methods for dealing with setbacks and pressure."

- "89% Of students surveyed said that, as a result of the Positive Minds programme, they had better levels of controlling unnecessary worries."

- "63% Of students surveyed said that their ability to focus on their academic work has improved with Positive Minds."

- "70% Of students surveyed said that their ability to deal with pressure and setbacks at university has improved as a result of the programme."
The students in the Positive Group rated themselves as significantly more likely to be able to switch off from studying \( (p=.038) \).

The students in the Negative Group rated themselves as significantly more likely to feel excluded from groups around them \( (p=.019) \). They were also significantly more likely to have felt nervous or on edge over the previous two weeks \( (p=.031) \) and to feel that they weren’t able to stop or control their worrying \( (p=.004) \).

**EB & RFA CORRELATION DATA**

We analysed the RFA data against the EB entries from 100 students across the cohort who went through the Positive Minds programme. The sample was split into those who logged their EB in either of the left quadrants more than 50% of the time and those who logged their EB in the right quadrants more than 50% of the time.* This enabled us to create a ‘Positive Group’ [N=68] to compare with a ‘Negative Group’ [N=22].

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**LEFT VS RIGHT**

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The students in the Negative Group rated themselves as significantly more likely to feel excluded from groups around them \( (p=.019) \). They were also significantly more likely to have felt nervous or on edge over the previous two weeks \( (p=.031) \) and to feel that they weren’t able to stop or control their worrying \( (p=.004) \).

**GENDER**

[Male N=24, Female N=74]

Analysis showed that males were significantly more likely than females to find it easier to unwind after studying \( (p=.025) \).

Females were significantly more likely to say that they felt able to cope with the levels of pressure and stress at university \( (p=.022) \).

**LEVEL OF STUDY**

[Undergraduates N=78, Postgraduates N=21]

Undergraduates were significantly more likely to say that levels of stress and/or workload had led them to exercise less \( (p=.002) \). They were also significantly more likely to feel excluded from groups around them, compared with postgraduate students \( (p=.008) \).

*This was based on each student placing two or more EB entries over the period of November 2016 to May 2017. Students who inputted less than two entries were discounted.
BEHAVIOURAL IMPACT ANALYSIS

Positive completed qualitative analysis on the behavioural change of 30 students as a result of taking part in the Positive Minds programme. The findings were interpreted and grouped to give the following common improvements.

1. **More solution focused**
   - Our initial response to pressure or setbacks is typically to worry or panic. Feedback here suggested that 18 of the surveyed students now have the ability to re-appraise situations and engage their more rational thinking mind to come to a solution more quickly.

2. **Greater awareness of self-talk and how to be more compassionate**
   - 26 of the students felt that they are now able to bring in a compassionate mind when things don't quite go their way; they adopt the role of an 'inner coach' rather than an 'inner critic'.

3. **Improved focus and ability to be mindful/live in the moment**
   - 17 students now feel more able to appreciate the present moment by practising mindfulness and using techniques to avoid distractions, both internal and external. This has positive effects for both concentration and procrastination.

4. **More able to recognise what can be changed and to take a step back to do so**
   - Feedback here suggested that students are making use of neuroplasticity. The brain can be 'rewired' by changing habits and behaviour; taking a step back and being realistic about what is worth our time and worry helps to do this.

5. **Increased consideration towards others**
   - 16 students suggested that the social aspect of the course had been very important to them and improved their ability to see things from other people's perspectives.

6. **Greater positivity**
   - 23 of those surveyed felt that they were now more positive in regards to their view of themselves and the world around them. They felt that their behaviour, thoughts and feelings overall had become more positive as a result of the programme.

7. **More calm**
   - Finally, 16 of the students felt that they were now better at taking time to reflect on the good things in their lives. They felt that they viewed stress in a different way – not so much something to become more stressed over, but as something which could be dealt with using the tools and techniques in the programme to bounce back to flourishing.

Significantly increased emotional awareness

This was mentioned by 29 out of 30 students surveyed. Being aware of our emotional states affects how we think, feel and behave towards ourselves and those around us.
Finally, we asked the students to sum up their experience of the Positive Minds programme...

‘The Positive Minds experience has been full of useful tools to stay relaxed, be more resilient to negative life events and to understand that everyone is struggling through university life at times; no-one is alone.’

‘I have enjoyed the activities the programme provided and the tools to help me in my academic and future work career. I think this has been invaluable to me.’

‘I loved it! Had very insightful discussions with the group of students in my cohort.’

‘Positive Minds is a wonderful, knowledge-building experience which helped me to focus on the positives.’

‘My experience has been eye-opening, extremely pleasant and very enlightening.’

‘When I first started I was unsure of what to expect and nervous but I have to say that people in the course were very engaging and it was an enjoyable course as I enjoyed bouncing ideas and breaking out of my comfort zone.’

‘Sessions were interesting and engaging and it was comforting to know that other people were having the same struggles as I.’

‘Effective, hands on, empowering.’

‘It has been a great opportunity to really understand and learn how effective and easy managing stress can be.’