# Program Sessions

# Year One: Certificate Studies

## 1. Introduction to Positive Psychology

Throughout human history, religious, scientific, and spiritual thinkers have grappled with the question of human happiness. When we turn to the world of psychological research for a scientific answer to this question, we discover countless ideas, tools, and applications that can promote our happiness and mental well-being as individuals and groups. Most of these ideas are concentrated in a relatively young field of psychology known as positive psychology. Positive psychology focuses on the optimal functioning of individuals and groups, and on the factors that promote positive emotions, positive traits, self-actualization, and success. In recent decades, positive psychology has experienced rapid growth and high popularity in research, and in applied fields of education, therapy, and organizational settings. The introductory session exposes participants to a concentrated overview of the core components, ideas, and foundational assumptions of positive psychology, which form the basis of the entire program.

## 2. Change Is Possible

Children often dream. They imagine that one day they will become someone entirely different, and their dreams change constantly. To some extent, the tension between who we want to be and who we are accompanies us throughout our lives. Yet during adolescence and adulthood, a growing sense of identity develops, along with acceptance of the limitations and constraints dictated by our life circumstances and the realistic possibilities available to each of us. This session reveals the power of the belief in change by presenting research-based educational interventions from around the world that have generated far-reaching positive transformations. Through case studies, important elements for achieving change in one's life will be identified.

## 3. The Permission to Be Human

A basic assumption in theory, research, and clinical practice in the field of emotion regulation is that it is important to process and cope with negative emotions. For example, the ability to express and process negative emotions following an unpleasant event has been found to be associated with a range of positive physical and mental outcomes. Nevertheless, many people prefer to conceal their negative feelings and resort to various

psychological mechanisms that dull and diminish the place of negative emotion. Acceptance is a prerequisite for healthy and authentic emotional life. When we accept our emotions and welcome the human within us, a psychological space opens in which we can feel the full range of emotions connected to experience. This session focuses on the ability to allow ourselves the permission and the space to feel and express the entire spectrum of human emotions.

## 4. Positive Emotions

The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions argues that certain positive emotions — including joy, interest, contentment, pride, and love — broaden the repertoire of thoughts and actions, and build a person's physical, intellectual, social, and psychological resources. Many studies indicate that experiences containing high-intensity positive emotions promote creativity, broader knowledge, resilience, social integration, and physical health. This session explores "the value of finding value" and the contribution of positive emotions to achieving psychological growth and improving mental and physical health.

## 5. From Beliefs to Reality

The ideas that "words create worlds" and "thoughts create reality" have attracted substantial research interest in the psychological literature over the past hundred years. Studies have identified mechanisms and key variables that explain the ability to turn beliefs into reality, including: positive expectations, optimism and hope, focus, positive interpretation of events, and flexible thinking patterns. This session examines theoretical approaches that address the relationship between beliefs and reality, and discusses their application in personal and professional contexts.

## 6. Change in Practice

We all know attempts at change that, even if initially successful, did not last. Building on recent discoveries in neuroscience — showing that the human brain continues to change throughout adulthood — this session reveals ways to create meaningful, stable, and lasting change in our lives. This will be done by addressing three functional domains, which can be called "the ABC of Psychology": Affect (emotion), Behaviour, and Cognition (thought).

## 7. Focus and Gratitude as a Way of Life

In everyday life, people experience countless successes and failures — from winning a championship to receiving a low grade on a test, from winning a valuable prize to the end of a relationship. How will these events affect us? The psychological literature shows that the impact of events is not related to their objective severity or intensity, but rather to the subjective interpretation given to them. Research in this field concludes that the way people perceive the world is far more significant to their happiness than the objective circumstances of their lives. This session addresses the role of focus and interpretation in creating the reality of our lives. Throughout history, spiritual traditions, philosophical approaches, and religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism have all emphasized the importance of gratitude. Gratitude is defined as a feeling, emotion, or attitude arising from the recognition of a benefit received in the past, present, or anticipated in the future. The ability to feel gratitude is the opposite of taking reality for granted. It awakens us and allows us to see the beauty of the world, the beauty of our lives, and the wonder of creation. Many studies indicate that simple gratitude exercises have

produced significant improvements in people's feelings of satisfaction and mental well-being. The aim of this session is to provide tools and cultivate feelings of gratitude and appreciation among participants.

## 8. Personal Strengths

Theories about the nature of good character appeared as far back as two thousand years ago and are deeply rooted in morality, philosophy, and religion. In recent years, research into character, virtues, and moral traits has been renewed, with substantial effort invested in identifying strengths that promote mental well-being and flourishing. Strengths have been defined as positive character traits, rooted in values, that can be acquired and cultivated over time. The aim of this session is to enable participants to identify their character strengths — traits that represent their natural talents and give them energy and enthusiasm. Additionally, the session aims to raise participants' awareness of areas of life in which their characteristic strengths can and should be used.

## 9. Setting and Applying Personal Goals

People who set goals for themselves tend, according to the research literature, to be happier and more successful. However, not all goals produce the same results. Sometimes, people find themselves enslaved to a particular goal that actually makes them less satisfied with their lives. In this session, we will focus on setting Self-Concordant Goals — goals that arise from an inner need and strong interest. We will also address the formulation and planning of meaningful personal goals, grounded in personal strengths, that will yield self-actualization and mental well-being.

## 10. Body and Mind

The question of the connection between body and mind, widely discussed in recent years, is not unique to our era. Hippocrates, the great physician and philosopher of ancient Greece and "father of Western medicine," argued that "It is more important to know what sort of person has a disease than to know what sort of disease a person has." The mutual influences of psychological and physical processes have been extensively studied in the world of psychology in recent decades. On one hand, the mind is affected by the body, as a decline in physical health can cause deterioration in mood and sometimes psychological symptoms. On the other hand, the body is affected by the mind, in accordance with the connections found between psychological variables — such as mood disorders and internal stress states — and chronic illness. This session is devoted to the issue of balance between body and mind, and the significant role of sleep, nutrition, physical activity, and touch in our mental well-being.

## 11. Mindfulness Meditation

If we close our eyes for a moment, we discover that our consciousness automatically wanders toward the past or future, distracting us from the present moment. Mindfulness is the ability to be fully present in the here and now — moment by moment — aware of the uniqueness of the current moment without judgment or any attempt to "direct" reality. This capacity has been found in numerous studies to be a significant asset both physically and mentally: it leads to the reduction of stress and pressure, contributes to improved quality of life, empathy, and psychological stability, and also strengthens the immune system and thickens areas of the brain associated with mental well-being. In this session, we will explore one of the techniques designed to develop this capacity, encounter the elusive

nature of consciousness, and attempt to explore it through direct experience.

## 12. Stress and Flow

The topic of stress is prevalent today throughout the Western world, as an achievement-oriented, expectation-laden lifestyle undermines the quality of life and health of many people worldwide. The psychological literature extensively engages with the question: "Why is stress so common today?" Although this question has great research value and importance, it is not sufficient to understand the phenomenon in its entirety. Research from the field of positive psychology also addresses the question: "What are the characteristics of those individuals who succeed in leading a healthy, peaceful, and happy life?" This session focuses on research-based tools that allow participants to moderate the experience of stress and enhance experiences of flow and serenity.

## 13. Perfectionism and Self-Acceptance

For a perfectionist, life is an endless pursuit of achievement. Perfectionism involves an obsessive striving for "the perfect" that has repeatedly been linked in the research literature to mood disorders and additional psychological difficulties. Perfectionism has also been conceptualized as the enemy of creativity, productivity, goodness, and mental health. Perfectionism halts people's progress during the execution of tasks due to excessive and exhausting preoccupation with details, and impairs their ability to take a broader view of the task. In addition, perfectionism has been associated in the research literature with high fear of failure. This session addresses issues of self-criticism and criticism of others, alongside self-acceptance, and discusses the ability to cope with failures and grow from them, using case studies of well-known figures from the worlds of science, politics, and sports throughout history.

## 14. Relationships and Social Support

Two leading researchers in positive psychology conducted a study focusing on extremely happy individuals, who were compared to a control group of individuals who were not happy (Diener & Seligman, 2002). When the researchers examined the characteristics of the happy group, they found that it differed markedly in its reports of a rich and satisfying social life. The happy individuals were characterized by close relationships and intimate friendships. Similar findings emerged from resilience research. Populations found to be in crisis situations and at risk showed the ability to cope and function well, despite difficult circumstances, in situations where they felt strong social or familial support. Positive, supportive relationships are the foundation of resilience, coping, and mental well-being. The aim of this session is to promote positive relationships with friends, family members, and other members of the community, and to encourage the creation of positive functioning environments.

## 15. Personal and Group Summary

Sometimes a stranger passes by and, in a human gesture, offers a gift to our lives. "Like the elderly woman who returned your wallet yesterday, like the small child who showed you the wonder in a small thing, like the poor man who offered to share his meal with you. Like the wealthy man who showed you that everything is truly possible if you only believe, or like a stranger who happened by at just the right moment, when you had lost your way" (Yossi Kedmi). Research indicates that behaviors of giving to others contribute significantly to increasing feelings of happiness. This session is designed to provide a space for sharing insights and processes that occurred throughout the program, from personal and interpersonal perspectives, while raising possibilities for applying insights and processes in the social and community sphere.