Promoting happiness in autistic people

It is remarkable that emotional wellbeing and the pursuit of it, although being highly valued for every human being, has received so little attention in the field of autism. Studies of the effects and outcomes of certain interventions rarely include emotional wellbeing as a desired outcome.

Measuring effects

The effects of interventions are evaluated by measurements and assessment of aspects such as:

- number and degree of autism symptoms
- levels of cognitive functioning
- skills and behaviours, in particular social skills.

It is nice to see that certain autism interventions are evidence based, using evidence such as:

- significant increases in the child’s IQ
- adaptive behaviour scores
- decreases in challenging behaviours
- less need of support
- more inclusion.

These children are smarter, more skilled, less challenging, more independent and more included, but are they necessarily also happier?

Measuring outcomes

What we see in these research interventions is also true for follow-up or outcome studies, those that explore the outcome of autism in adulthood. When assessing the outcome of autism in adult life, ‘objective’ criteria tends to be used such as:

- whether autistic adults have a job or not

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- where they live
- what their levels of cognitive and adaptive functioning are
- if they have friends and how many
- how much support they (still) need.

So criteria for success in life focus exclusively on the level of independence and adaptive functioning, not on quality of life and certainly not on the personal experience of emotional wellbeing.

Underneath this approach is the assumption that success in life and happiness are based on high levels of independence and adaptive functioning. That assumption should be challenged. It is not because an autistic person has a job and lives more or less independently that he or she is also happy and thriving. Conversely, living in a group home with a lot of support does not exclude a high quality of life.

**Using positive psychology to measure well-being**

When the focus is on well-being, it is often from a negative perspective, namely the lack of well-being and quality of life in autism. A lot of research has been done to explore mental health issues in autism and these studies have indeed shown that being autistic involves an increased risk for developing mental health issues, mainly stress, anxiety and depression.

However, based on the principles of positive psychology, we argue for a change in focus and we suggest that instead of concentrating on the lack of emotional wellbeing in autistic people, we should develop strategies to facilitate their feeling of happiness.

**The pursuit of happiness**

To start with, the first and most important step in promoting happiness in autistic people, is to develop autism-friendly ways of assessing their positive feelings. We should avoiding forcing autistic people into a neurotypical concept of happiness: happiness is a personal and subjective construct and the things that make an autistic person happy do not necessarily mirror those that make a neurotypical person happy.

There are a lot of tools and questionnaires to assess negative feelings such as anxiety and depression, but tools to find out what is related to emotional wellbeing are lacking in the autism field, especially questionnaires that are adapted to the typical autistic style in understanding language and communication. Traditional questions about emotional well-being such as “do you usually wake up feeling fresh and rested”, can be quite confusing for a brain that is inclined towards literal understanding of words and sentences.

Once we know what makes a person with autism flourish and thrive, we should develop strategies that aim at supporting the autistic person in pursuing emotional wellbeing. This does not always mean that more support will increase the wellbeing. We should not forget that autistic people, just as any other person, need challenges in life.
So, we should aim at the right balance between support/protection and challenges. Support should be adapted to the needs of the autistic person in terms of:

- quantity (how much)
- content (for what)
- style (how).

‘Goodness of fit’ is more important than how much support is offered. In interventions and education, the aim should not be the highest level of functioning, but one that gives life a meaning for autistic people. Being proud of what you are able to do (having success in life) is more important than higher scores on all kind of objective measures of independence and levels of functioning.

In creating sources of pride and a meaningful life, one of the biggest challenges will be to create job opportunities for autistic people. I am convinced that every autistic person can contribute to society, and that this feeling of contributing is one of the main sources of wellbeing.