"There can be no transforming of darkness into light and of apathy into movement without emotion.” Carl Jung

Prior to World War II, the field of psychology focused primarily on one mission: curing mental illness. Over time, psychology expanded to include efforts toward making all people’s lives more productive and toward identifying, promoting, and nurturing positive emotions and behaviors. Although attention to mental illness long overshadowed these more modern pursuits, both the field of positive psychology and the study of emotion-related skills have supported these aims: “to catalyze a change in psychology from repairing the worst things in life to also building the best things in life,” in the words of Martin Seligman (2002, p. 3).

While the Stoic philosophers regarded emotions as irrational and too self-absorbing to be useful, the Romantic movement of the 18th and 19th centuries gave rise to the idea that emotion-related phenomena such as empathy and intuition provided useful information that was unattainable through rational thought alone. In the 20th century psychologists and philosophers still debated whether emotions were disorganized interruptions of mental activity or whether they contributed to logical thought and intelligent behavior. John D. Mayer and Peter Salovey’s theory of emotional intelligence (EI) is grounded in the latter, functional view of emotion – that emotion should not be put into opposition with intelligence, but be viewed as a mental ability that facilitates the processing of emotion-related information and enhances cognitive activities and social functioning.

Both the theory and application of EI are linked inherently to positive psychology: EI contributes to human flourishing through intra- and interpersonal growth and intellectual and occupational success.

**What is EI?**

*The Ability Model of EI*

Mayer and Salovey defined EI as the processes involved in perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions to solve emotion-laden problems and regulate behavior. These four domains are viewed as forming a hierarchy, increasing in complexity from emotion perception to management. One’s overall EI is the combination of the four abilities. The ability model discussed here is distinct from trait or other models of EI which define and measure EI as a set of personality characteristics and perceived capacities.

*Perceiving emotions*, the first domain, pertains to the ability to identify emotions in oneself and others, as well as those evoked by objects, stories, music, and other stimuli. The
most basic aspects of this ability are identifying and differentiating emotions in one’s feelings, thoughts, and physical states, and expressing associated needs. At a more advanced level, this ability involves identifying emotions in other people using cues such as sound, appearance, language, and behavior; thus, enabling a person to discriminate between sincere and insincere emotional expressions and to be empathetic toward a grieving friend.

How can people utilize the emotions that they notice in themselves and others in order to reap maximum benefits? The second domain, using emotions, draws on emotion to focus attention and think more rationally, logically, and creatively. Due, in large part, to what positive psychology has already accomplished, the usefulness of soft concepts such as happiness, hope, courage, gratitude, or enjoyment is now recognized. Indeed, emotions can prioritize the cognitive system to attend to what is important, and help individuals focus on the best tasks to complete in a given mood. According to Barbara Fredrickson, positive emotions are not just reflections of optimal functioning – they actually produce it, both broadening a person’s mindset so that novel and creative responses are more likely and building resiliency to prepare for the future.

Emotionally intelligent people attend to and comprehend their own and others’ emotions, furthering the path toward growth. Thus, the third domain, understanding emotion, includes a vast knowledge of the emotion lexicon and the manner in which emotions combine with, progress, and transition from one another. The person who is able to understand emotions – their meanings, how they blend together, how they progress over time – is gifted with the capacity to understand important aspects of human nature and interpersonal relationships.

The fourth skill of EI is managing emotions, or the ability to regulate moods and emotions in oneself and in other people. When managing one’s own feelings, one must be able to monitor, discriminate between, and label his feelings accurately; believe that he can improve or modify these feelings, employ strategies that will alter his feelings; and assess the effectiveness of these strategies. Central to emotion management is the ability to reflect upon and manage one’s emotions. Emotional disclosure and acceptance and mindfulness practices have all proven to be useful for managing emotions. In general, the most successful regulation methods involve expenditure of energy, active mood management techniques that combine relaxation, stress management, cognitive effort, and exercise may be the most effective strategies for changing bad moods.

Measuring EI as a Mental Ability

EI is best described as a set of abilities and is therefore best measured by performance-based instruments. The Mayer-Salovey-Caruso EI Test Version 2.0 (MSCEIT) was designed to measure the four emotion-related abilities delineated by the four-branch model. The MSCEIT consists of 141 items that are divided among 8 tasks (two for each branch) which yield seven scores: one for each of the four branches, two area scores (Experiential EI, consisting of perceiving and using emotions, and Strategic EI, consisting of understanding and managing emotions), and a total EI score.

The MSCEIT has a factor structure congruent with the four domains of the theoretical model, and the test is reliable at the full-scale level ($r_s = .90$ to .96), the area level ($r_s = .84$ to .91) and the domain level ($r_s = .74$ to .91). The MSCEIT also predicts a wide range of important criteria.

The Benefits of EI

EI can help one to flourish in all aspects of life, including intra- and interpersonal functioning (e.g., mental and physical health, developing satisfying relationships with friends.
and loved ones), intellectual functioning (e.g., academic success), and occupational success (e.g., optimal performance at work).

**Intra- and Interpersonal Flourishing**

Because emotions provide information about one’s relationship with the environment and others, interpreting and responding to that information can direct action and thought in ways that enhance or maintain well-being. Among college students, MSCEIT scores correlate positively with well-being. People high in EI have lower rates of anxiety and depression. Individuals higher in EI, and managing emotions subcomponent in particular, also tend to be better at affective forecasting, or predicting how they will feel in the future.

EI is postulated to promote positive social functioning by focusing attention on important information in the environment, facilitating the ability to adopt others’ perspectives, enhancing communication about emotions, and regulating behavior. Individuals with higher MSCEIT scores tend to have more friends and better relationships with those friends; they also tend to experience less conflict and antagonism with friends and family members. Romantic couples with higher MSCEIT scores tend to report less negative interactions and greater happiness within their relationship than couples with both partners who are lower in EI. Similar results were found in studies using diary methods and ratings by friends and observers to assess social relationships; those who were high on the emotion management component of the MSCEIT, in particular, were rated by their friends as providing more emotional support to the relationship, and having a relationship that is replete with intimacy, affection, and admiration. Men with higher MSCEIT scores were rated by observers as being more socially competent and engaged in social interactions.

**Intellectual Flourishing**

EI is hypothesized to predict cognitive functioning because the abilities allow individuals to garner emotions to facilitate thinking and regulate emotions in order to focus on important information. MSCEIT scores correlate moderately with verbal SAT scores, verbal intelligence as measured by the WAIS-III, ACT scores, reasoning ability, academic giftedness, and general intelligence measures. In their meta-analysis of 18 studies that used the MSCEIT or its predecessor test, the Multi-Factorial EI Scale, Van Rooy and colleagues report a correlation of .34 (after correcting for unreliability in measurement) between EI scores and assessments of verbal and spatial intelligence.

Emotion-related skills are hypothesized to prioritize thinking and enable one to manage emotions in anxiety-provoking situations such as while taking a test. The evidence supporting the relationship between EI and school achievement is mixed. While some studies report no correlation between MSCEIT scores and school grades, a new study with a high school student sample reported that the Spanish Version of the MSCEIT, administered at the start of the academic year, predicted final grades after controlling for personality and academic intelligence. It is possible that the findings from high school students are stronger due to a restricted range of IQ scores in college student samples, which attenuate associations.

**Occupational Flourishing**

EI influences the capacity to interact and communicate effectively with others as well as the ability to manage conflict, handle stress, and perform under pressure. For these reasons, EI is predicted to be instrumental in leadership and workplace behavior. In a Fortune 500 insurance company, analysts and clerical employees from the finance department with higher MSCEIT scores received greater merit increases and held higher company rank than their counterparts who had low EI. The employees with high EI also received better peer and/or supervisor ratings of interpersonal facilitation, stress tolerance, and leadership potential than their counterparts. With few exceptions, these associations remained statistically significant after controlling for other predictors, including age, gender, education, verbal ability, and personality traits. Among
currently or recently employed undergraduates, MSCEIT scores also significantly predicted supervisor-rated job performance after controlling for cognitive intelligence. Finally, the total MSCEIT scores of 41 senior executives predicted leadership effectiveness as rated by managers.

**Developing EI**

How does one go about improving emotion-related abilities to promote optimal potential? Currently, interventions aimed at raising EI are being developed in education and workplace settings.

**Interventions in Education**

Successful schools ensure that students master basic skills such as reading and math, but recently educators have begun to support a broader agenda – one that enhances teachers’ and students’ social and emotional skills (SEL). Incorporating social and emotional learning programs into school districts can be challenging, however, as the programs should include training for both teachers and students, and receive backing from all levels of the district (i.e., superintendent, principals, and teachers). Additionally, the programs should be field-tested, evidence-based, founded on sound psychological and educational theory.

A majority of SEL programs focus on preventing or ameliorating social conflict and social skills deficits, but do not address the underlying emotion-related skills that may foster improved academic performance and healthy social development. Over the last decade, Marc Brackett and colleagues have addressed this shortcoming by developing curriculum for school administrators, teachers, and students. The programs are anchored in EI theory and recent developments in emotional literacy, the aspects of EI that are acquired through formal instruction in school, much the same way as general literacy is.

One program, Emotional Literacy in the Middle School, has been implemented in schools throughout the United States and United Kingdom. This program aims to help students ages 10 to 13 become emotionally literate by broadening their vocabulary and understanding of emotion concepts. Students learn to recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate emotions through myriad activities such as interpreting and analyzing emotions of television characters and music, creating collages or mobiles as related to various facial displays of emotion, and participating in discussions about appropriate strategies that can be used to enhance positive emotions and modify negative ones.

Administrators, teachers and students exhibit positive reactions to the programs. Empirical investigations support these positive impressions. In one study, fifth and six grade students who were instructed in emotional literacy for seven months (as compared to a control group) had higher end-of-year grades in science, reading, and writing, as well higher grades in “work habits,” which is comprised of subcategories including, “works cooperatively”, “follows directions”, and “demonstrates self-control.”

**Interventions in the Workplace**

Programs to increase EI abilities also can be found in the workplace. David Caruso and colleagues have developed a series of training modules and workshops designed to teach EI abilities (i.e., perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotion). Their curriculum includes group and individual exercises which increase awareness and understanding of EI. Skill practice is a central part of the workshop. Perceiving emotions is taught by having participants observe each other expressing emotions. Using emotions is learned through experiential tasks which induce various moods and require participants to reason or solve problems. Word games are included to enhance participants’ ability to understand emotions. Finally, managing emotions is taught with exercises that expose participants to mood-inducing images which then require them to employ emotion management strategies to either display or suppress emotions.
Moreover, case studies and role plays are used to teach participants to employ the four abilities in a sequential, emotion-based problem solving model known as the emotional blueprint. This easy-to-learn strategy can be readily utilized in a wide variety of situations.

To test whether EI abilities can be learned, Kelly Chang implemented a semester-long intervention for college students. During the semester, participants in the intervention group attended a training during which they selected a target behavior to focus on based upon the results of EI assessments and then generated a self-directed change plan. Participants in the control group spent the same amount of time in a basic training of general psychology. Lectures, assignments, and exercises from Caruso and colleagues curriculum were part of the intervention group training. Participants met one-on-one with the course instructor, as well as in topic-based support groups and had to write a paper about the results of their training. Results of her experiment showed increases in MSCEIT scores in two domains (Understanding and Managing Emotion) for the intervention group, but not the control group.

The Future of EI

Despite the burgeoning of research on emotional intelligence, many unaddressed questions remain. The value of all four domains of EI seems to depend heavily upon how well the user adapts to the context in which the skill is needed. Being emotionally intelligent is more than just possessing the skills and abilities described in the four-part model, but also having the capacity to utilize them appropriately in a given situation.

More research is needed on how EI influences optimal performance across life dimensions and throughout the lifespan. It would be beneficial to investigate the extent to which EI is associated with elements influential to well-being such as flow, self-esteem and self-efficacy, mindfulness, and gratefulness. Additionally, research is needed on how EI relates to the development and achievement of self concordant goals, which have proven to predict both work satisfaction and success.

SEE ALSO: emotions, organizational psychology, affective forecasting, emotional development, social skills, Barbara Frederickson

REFERENCE:

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