

The Prevalence of Positive Affirmations as Clinical Intervention Among Mental Health Practitioners: A Brief Survey

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ABSTRACT

Positive self-affirmations are, by both anecdote and demonstrable presence in popular and academic literature, an accepted therapeutic intervention. Yet little to no literature exists exploring the number of practicing mental health clinicians employing the technique with their patients. This paper briefly explores the psychological theory underlying the use of affirming statements in a clinical context (self-affirmation theory) as well as the place of the practice within both academic and popular writing. Finally, the paper shares the result of a limited survey among mental health practitioners to assess how prevalent the intervention actually is. Positive affirmations are shown to be very prevalent within the surveyed population indicating a high desirability for further study in this regard.

Keywords: Positive-Affirmation, Self-Affirmation, CBT, Psychotherapy, Mental Health

INTRODUCTION

The efficacy of positive self-affirmations as an intervention for those undergoing emotional stress is a contentious issue within the field of clinical psychology (Yeung & Lun, 2016). While Cascio et al.'s (2016) functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study showed increased activity within areas of the brain that could be predictive of future positive changes in behavior, other studies, such as Flynn and Bordieri's (2020) attempt to replicate the findings of Wood et al. (2009), have failed to produce measurable positive impacts upon self-esteem and functioning.

Despite this, the use of positive affirmations appears to be ever-popular among mental health clinicians as well as within the pages of self-help books, websites and apps (Moore, 2019). This paper aims to briefly examine this usage via a concise look at the theory underlying clinical applications of positive self-affirmations, a review of published media, including academic and popular articles mentioning the practice, and by a limited sample of practicing clinicians.

POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS AND SELF-AFFIRMATION THEORY

The main theory underlying the use of positive affirmations within a therapeutic context is attributed to Steele's seminal work "The psychology of self-affirmation: Sustaining the integrity of the self" (1988). In this work, Steele posits that a major motivator of an individual's thoughts and behaviors is the need to maintain a "global self-integrity" which he defines as feeling "adaptively and morally adequate... competent, good, coherent... stable, capable of free choice [and] capable of controlling important outcomes" (Steele, 1988, p. 262). Within this framework, an individual's responses to traumatic or

threatening experiences or stimuli can often be seen as an attempt to maintain this integrity of the self, the image of the individual as a “moral and adaptive actor” (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 336).

This adaptability of the self, that is the ability of the individual to both function and flourish in multiple different social and environmental circumstances across a lifetime, is linked to the central postulation within Steele’s self-affirmation theory: that people need to see themselves as globally rather than contextually good. As Cohen and Sherman state “the self can draw on a variety of roles and identities to maintain its perceived integrity” allowing a great degree of flexibility and, ideally, ample opportunity in which to validate the self (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 336).

This sense of global competence goes beyond individual roles or circumstances. Rather than being a good teacher or student, a good athlete or painter, a good daughter or father, self-affirmation theory states that the individual is prompted by their self-system to seek self-validation for deeper, core beliefs addressing goodness of their person, rather than fit or performance in a single, particular role or dimension.

When under threat, physically or psychologically, people tend to narrow their mental horizons, focusing upon the perceived problem and immediate associated fears (the possible end of a relationship, failure at work or school etc.). Although this focus may have been evolutionarily beneficial, promoting self-protection and ultimately survival, in the short term it may also blind an individual to self strengths and resources otherwise available to them. Positive self-affirmations can help people put stressors and threats into the wider context of their full selves (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009), freeing self-resources and reducing perceived danger by reaffirming their self-competency.

Moreover, access to this reaffirmed self has been shown to have lasting effects upon individuals’ self-esteem (McQueen & Klein, 2006), as the bolstering of core values and beliefs associated with self-integrity, afford greater resilience and capability. Positive affirmations and the global self-acceptance that they engender are therefore, theoretically at least, powerful tools within the context of therapy and self-growth.

To engage in the use of self-affirmations is to “demonstrate one’s adequacy” (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 337), strengthening the view of the self as globally OK via statements that reinforce the self-system. Such statements are generally “uplifting and motivating... and phrased in the present tense,” examples of which can be broadened beyond the global and broken into three categories: personal affirmations, addressing particular goals; general affirmations, addressing universal attributes; and affirmations designed to reduce stress and promote positive mood and emotional regulation (Kadian, 2023, p. 1-2). Positive affirmations can therefore be seen to “lift psychological barriers to change through two routes: the buffering or lessening of psychological threat and the curtailing of defensive adaptations to it” (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 339). By helping their patients to first identify and then integrate positive affirmations into their routines, therapists encourage those in their care to access innate strengths to help address challenges both psychological and environmental.

POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS IN THE LITERATURE

Several academic sources regarding the effect and clinical impact of positive affirmations have been touched on in the above section. However there is far from consensus as to the efficacy of such interventions within the literature, particularly across different populations.

While studies in social psychology have shown that when people self-affirm they are less likely to reject, or react defensively to threatening messages (i.e. in the case of public health messaging) (Cohen et al., 2000), cultural differences, such as the degree to which a society is constructed upon individualistic or

more collectivist lines, have been shown to have a significant effect upon the impact of affirmations and potential behavioral change (Choi & So, 2019).

Similarly, while self-affirmation has also been shown to improve problem solving among chronically stressed individuals (Creswell et al., 2013) and numerous studies have explored the link between positive affirmations and improved performance within educational settings (see Arquiza, 2020, Cohen et al., 2006), the credibility of their positive impact upon people with low self-esteem has been called into question (Wood et al., 2009). Indeed the mitigating effect of poor self-image upon positive self-affirmations is well documented in the literature (Dziembowska et al., 2021) as individuals with poor self-esteem may struggle with cognitive dissonance associated with messages that challenge deeply held negative core beliefs.

Moreover it is worth noting that studies such as Yeung and Lun's (2016) showed that an individual's mood may actually be decreased following positive self-statements rather than improved. Positive affirmations are therefore obviously not a panacea and their use in therapeutic contexts requires additional study and caution on the part of the clinician (Yeung & Lun, 2016).

When addressing specific diagnoses however, studies have shown that positive affirmation can be successfully used (within the setting of a clinical trial) to reduce frequency and intensity of the worry associated with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (Eagleson et al., 2016). While individuals experiencing low mood, potentially associated with Major Depressive Disorder, have also shown improved emotional regulation and generally decreased negative affect following self-affirmation (Emanuel et al., 2018). Several studies have similarly address the role of positive appraisal, that is the reframing of potential threats or barriers in an uplifting light (an act often associated with positive affirmation), to be beneficial to both those experiencing bereavement and associated Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Thomadaki, 2017) as well as among U.S. veterans suffering PTSD from the Vietnam War (Dohrenwend et al., 2004).

Such findings are not limited only to social scientific studies. Exploring the neurological and biological underpinnings of psychological change, Dziembowska et al. collected electroencephalographic (EEG) data from people listening to positive self-statements and found that "higher appreciation of self... corresponded to greater resting right prefrontal and frontal hypoactivity" among affirmed participants but not among those who remained unaffirmed (Dziembowska et al., 2021, p. 1921). Although the exact relationship between EEG activity and mental and emotional functioning is not yet fully understood, the findings of this study suggest a link between positive affirmation and brain activity, lending further credence to the practice's transformative claim.

Similarly, Cascio et al.'s aforementioned work using fMRI, which measures blood flow as opposed to electrical activity in the brain, found that areas of the brain linked with "reward/valuation... [were the] primary pathways associated with self affirmation" which indicated that "positive valuation and self-related processing may be reinforced" by the practice (Cascio et al., 2016). Taken together, both EEG and fMRI observations point a path toward possible understanding of the underlying mechanisms corresponding to positive self-affirmation, opening the door to an increase in both future therapeutic applications and to future study.

In popular psychological and self-help literature positive affirmations have held a commanding presence for many years (Yeung & Lun, 2016) with, at the time of writing, searches for "positive affirmations" and "self affirmations" producing in excess of ten thousand hits apiece on Amazon.com (presumably with some overlap). In the United States alone, the self-improvement market is estimated to be worth \$13.4

billion (LaRosa, 2023) and the incentive for authors and publishers to tap into popular trends is therefore high. Yet the influence of positive affirmations on the popular psyche, often conflated with positive thought, can be traced back to at least 1952 and minister Norman Vincent Peale's (still) bestselling self-help title "The Power of Positive Thinking," which helped popularize the claim that people can attract success and happiness via internalizing positive thoughts (Peale, 1952). Such pseudoscientific ideas persist in popularity with more recent publications such as Rhonda Byrne's 2006 "The Secret," promising that readers' thoughts can influence objective circumstances via "laws of attraction" and manipulation of parapsychological energy (Byrne, 2006).

While such works have little to no basis in psychological research, their tangential association with positive affirmations and legitimate therapeutic applications of self-affirmation theory is likely to influence the general public's impression of such interventions (both Peale and Byrne's books appear in the previous Amazon.com searches for affirmation-related terms). Moreover, their relative accessibility when compared to therapy services means that self-help resources can often have an outsized influence upon popular understanding of the field (Starker, 1989).

A borderline example can be found in large online resources such as PsychologyToday.com which brands itself as the "world's largest mental health and behavioral science destination," and hosts numerous articles on positive self-affirmations (see Davis, 2024, Vilhauer, 2020 for example). Many of these posts contain scientifically factual information and clinically appropriate suggestions for self-help-style application of affirmations. They are written by mental health professionals and available on a website alongside a searchable catalog of licensed therapists. Yet their appearance in search results next to erroneous concepts such as "laws of attraction" and positive-energy manipulation, can detract from their legitimate, educational messaging and lead to confusion and, in the worst cases, exploitation of people's pain and desire to heal.

Clinicians are therefore perhaps best to be mindful that patients may well be entering therapy with at least a passing familiarity of positive affirmations, whether misinformed or not.

CLINICIAN SURVEY

The prevalence of literature, peer reviewed or otherwise, supporting or examining the use of positive affirmations as a therapeutic intervention points to their popularity among both clinicians and the general public. To further explore the use of such self-statements in clinical settings and to address an apparent deficit in the current literature, a small survey was conducted with mental health practitioners in the East North Central states of the U.S. The aim of the survey was to see how many clinicians identified as using positive affirmations with their patients.

Results were gathered via a simple online survey asking practicing, licensed clinicians "Do you use positive affirmations as a clinical intervention with your patients/clients?" Participants were given three options as responses: Yes, No, and Unsure; respondents were limited to answering the survey only once and could choose only one of the three stated options.

The question was sent to over three hundred practicing mental health workers, including clinical social workers, clinical psychologists, counselors, and marriage and family therapists practicing at various locations within Michigan, Illinois, and Ohio in October 2024. Recipients were given two weeks in which to answer.

All respondents self-identified as practicing in direct client, or patient-facing roles in any combination of in-person, online or hybrid environments. No restrictions were placed as to setting (i.e. hospital,

community health center, private practice etc.) or population groups served so as to maximize the available sample size.

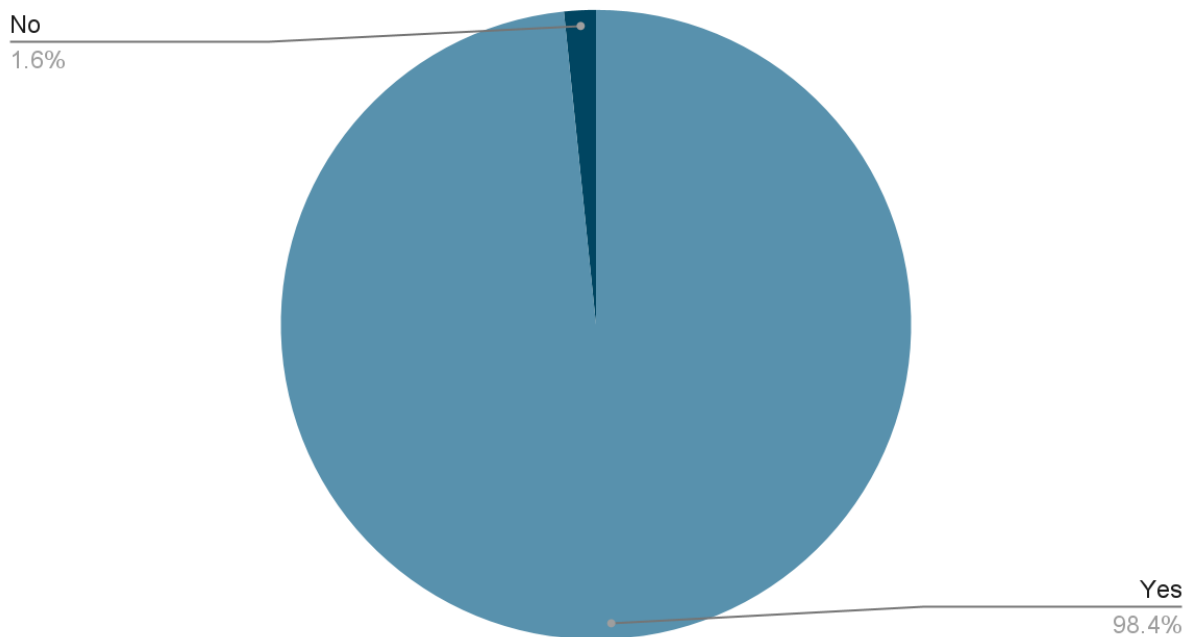
Results

Of three hundred possible respondents, only one hundred twenty three answered the survey within the designated time. Of the answers received, one hundred twenty one responded positively by selecting “Yes” to indicate that they do use positive affirmations with their patients, while only two responded negatively. No clinicians selected the third option of “Unsure.”

Table 1: Do you use positive affirmations with your patients/clients?

Yes	121
No	2
Unsure	0

Chart 1: Do you use positive affirmations with you patients/clients?



These findings indicate that positive affirmations are overwhelmingly popular as a clinical intervention within the surveyed sample, with 98.4 percent endorsing their use. The tiny number of respondents indicating that they do not use such statements with their patients (1.6 percent) represents a clear outlier, while the lack of responses stating that they were “Unsure” further strengthens the notion that most, if not virtually all, clinicians are familiar with the concept of self-affirmations if not actively practicing.

On the basis of this study positive affirmations can therefore be said to be highly prevalent as a clinical intervention among mental health practitioners. However, with an N of 123, the scope of this study is small and opens the possibility for further work to explore the use of positive affirmations within a therapeutic context. Aside from surveying a larger and wider range of practicing clinicians, future studies

could draw greater distinction between populations served, clinician license status and type, and setting in which such interventions are utilized. Given the lack of certainty within the scientific research, it would also be fruitful to examine the means by which such positive affirmations are employed, the underlying diagnoses addressed as well as the clinicians', and potentially also their patients', assessment of the success of such interventions.

CONCLUSION

The prevalence of positive affirmations as a clinical intervention among mental health practitioners is high. This can be observed despite ongoing debate within the academic literature as to the effectiveness of such treatments. Moreover, positive affirmations have become a mainstay of the popular psychology/self-help space; anecdotally at least, clinicians as well as members of the general population, seem to believe in their effectiveness to help with low self-esteem and self-image, general mood management and even recovery from more serious mental and emotional distress. With this in mind, ongoing study of the efficacy and use of positive self-statements as a therapeutic tool is vital.

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