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Positive communication in health and wellness

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BOOK REVIEW

Positive communication in health and wellness, by M.J. Pitts and T.J. Socha, New York, NY, Peter Lang, 2013, 351 pp., US\$36.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4331-1445-8, US\$139.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4331-1446-5

How can positive communication impact health or constitute wellness? Particularly, how can communication contribute to a life that is pleasant, engaged, relationally rich, meaningful and filled with feelings of achievement? Editors Margaret Pitts and Thomas Socha answer these questions in their edited book, *Positive Communication in Health and Wellness*, published as the third volume of Gary L. Kreps' *Health Communication* book series. Although positive communication scholarship, as well as theories of happiness and subjective well-being, has flourished in the fields of psychology and management (e.g. Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Seligman, 2012), this book provides a major step forward in terms of communication scholars joining this important conversation. It builds from the authors' first volume that focused solely on positive interpersonal communication (Socha & Pitts, 2012).

The book is divided into three sections on positive communication, including: (1) health; (2) relational wellness; and (3) organizations and institutions. The first section opens with a chapter that synthesizes the way relational communication impacts health, and is followed by four empirical studies including topics of humor, hope, self-help, and coping with cancer. These studies provide vivid evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, of how celebrating, sharing, giggling, and expressing gratitude have tangible effects on our physical and mental wellness. Section two includes five studies on relationships, including the interactions of positive thinking and positive talk, creating messages that support self-esteem, the role of communication coaches on wellness, and an emotional chapter on the power of positive communication in end-of-life conversations. Section three focuses on organizations and institutions, an area the editors note is especially rich for and relatively untapped by communication scholars. The seven essays illustrate the importance of validating strength even during trauma, examining the bright side of corporate crises, the striking impact of flow on employee (and student) happiness and productivity, and how respect can be constituted through collaborative theatre.

The book, packed with research and scholarly citations, is also appropriate for consultants, practitioners,

and laypeople. Many of the essays provide rich descriptions of organizations/groups that model supportive messaging and positive organizational culture, and suggest how these can be replicated elsewhere. Immediately upon reading the chapter on esteem support (Chapter 8), I was able to create a message that could more effectively support an anxious friend. After reading about flow (Chapters 15 and 16), I began brainstorming about how I could structure work in my organization and classroom so that it included clearer goals, more consistent and frequent feedback, and that perfect sweet spot of challenge and skill (the three key aspects of flow).

Many of the chapters provide models or theories that are ripe for further testing and investigation. Ideas that seem especially promising include studying the work of executive and life coaches; investigating the roles of empathy, motivation, and encouragement in terms of communication competence; and examining how we might create better flow in all aspects of our work as well as in the classroom. As such, this is an ideal book for scholars hoping to engage in future positive communication research.

I would also note the fact that the book addresses positivity in a nuanced and complex way, highlighting the way that 'bright-side' communication can also have a dark side. Humor is not always successful. Cheery communication, when it minimizes the concerns of the sick, is not supportive. Idealization of our partner may lead to a better relationship, but it may also go too far when it supports someone who is guilty or dangerous. The essays do an admirable job at studying positivity without being sickly sweet or naively romantic.

Of course, there are always things that a book could have done differently. I wished, for instance, that the authors of Chapter 7 on the interaction of positive thinking and positive talk would have done more to acknowledge how our external talk can constitute cognition. Specifically, an incorporation of Karl Weick's notion of retroactive sensemaking may have elucidated how our feelings, cognitions, and sense are as much determined by our actions and talk as vice versa. We may feel compassionate, for instance, only after acting that way (Way & Tracy, 2012). Additionally, I desired more direction from the authors in Chapters 15 and 16 in terms of how we might best examine the notion of flow in organizational settings. And, I found the tone of Chapter 12 to be significantly dense compared to the other readable and engaging essays.

All in all, I very much enjoyed and learned from this book, and believe it is a must read for students, scholars, and practitioners interested in topics of communication, happiness, and positive organizational studies. Not only do the essays within Pitts & Socha's volume review the latest scholarly literature, but they cover a wide span of methodologies and topics, and are written in a way that will make you laugh, cry, and, most importantly, keep turning the page.

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