

## Transcript from interview with Prof Alan Carr hosted by the Division of Clinical Psychology (DCP)

**Overview.** In this interview [Alan Carr](#), Full Professor of Clinical Psychology at UCD, speaks with Aidan McKiernan (AMK), Chairperson of the Division of Clinical Psychology to discuss ways that healthcare workers can maintain their well-being in the weeks and months ahead. Drawing on the science of human strengths, and by reference to his latest book titled, [Positive Psychology & You](#), Professor Carr emphasises the importance of building strong supportive relationships, leaning into positive personality strengths, developing grit and perseverance, maintaining clarity of focus and cultivating gratitude and optimism.



Ways healthcare workers can optimise their well-being during the COVID-19 crisis

**AMK** Welcome. This interview is brought to you by the Division of Clinical Psychology at the Psychological Society of Ireland. The focus is on supporting those who are actively involved in the response to COVID-19 to maintain their well-being in the weeks and months ahead. I'm joined on this call by Alan Carr, who is a Full Professor of Clinical Psychology at UCD. Professor Carr is the founding director of the UCD doctoral programme in clinical psychology and former head of the UCD School of Psychology. He has a couple and family therapy clinical practice at the Clanwilliam Institute in Dublin and, in his research and writing, he's made a major contribution to psychological science at an international level. His latest book *Positive Psychology & You* is aimed at enhancing the reader's well-being by helping the reader to understand and develop what is best in them.

Professor Carr, thank you for agreeing to give this interview. In your book, you talk about strategies that we can practice to build strong relationships. We know that many homes around the country have one or more people in the family who are responding in a direct way to the COVID-19 crisis. Their routines are now changed and they're facing uncertainty. Huge demands are being placed on them. They may have to spend more time apart from their loved ones, working longer hours. And some other families are having to spend more time together with their loved ones in close proximity, in quarantine for weeks. What of these strategies that you describe in your book, for building strong relationships, are relevant to the people who are manning the front lines of services?

**Prof Carr** At all times, but especially during crises like the one we're all facing the moment, our close relationships are the most important thing for our well-being. And I'm talking here about our relationships with our long-term partners, husbands or wives, or very close friends. Positive psychology research has made some important discoveries about strengthening support of long-term relationships. A lot of this research was done by John Gottman in the States. What he did

was he interviewed couples early in their marriages and then followed them up a decade later and identified the things that distinguish couples that developed satisfying long-term relationships from those who separate or divorce. And here's what he found:

All couples have minor, solvable disagreements and ongoing unresolved perpetual relationship conflicts about things like, how to have relationships with their in-laws or how many children they're going to have or whether they should, where they should live or whether they should change houses. Now, couples who have satisfying, supportive long-term relationships do two things differently from those who don't have these kinds of relationships.

First of all, they have five times more positive exchanges than negative ones. So even where they're disagreeing, they make room for positive exchanges in those episodes;

And secondly, they accept that conflict is inevitable and they have routines for repairing conflicts or dealing with disagreements.

Now, here's what we know about couples with this 5 to 1 positivity ratio:

- They express admiration and fondness for each other regularly;
- They respond to each other's bids for emotional connection when they occur;
- They see each other in a positive light;
- And they give their partners the benefit of the doubt when their partners let them down;
- They take time to understand their partner's way of looking at the world, especially their life goals and their hopes and their dreams. They both talk about things that they value.

And these positive exchanges that they have built create a sense of trust and commitment. So that's about the positivity ratio. Here's what we know about couples who are good at repairing conflicts or disagreements.

- They begin these difficult conversations with a gentle start up, so they don't jump in with both guns blazing. They make space to talk about their differences calmly, and start gently;
- They remind themselves inside in the privacy of their mind that, above all else, they're talking to their best friend;
- They try to understand their partner's point of view as valid and take it into account when they're reaching compromises;
- And they accept that some differences are unresolvable, and that these are often fuelled by their partner's commitment to underlying hopes and dreams, which may be a bit different than their own;
- And they allow their partners to influence their decisions. So it's not a question of them trying to win. They're trying to reach a compromise in which they allow their partners to influence them;
- And they calm themselves down when they feel that they're becoming distressed or angry during these exchanges;

- And also, they don't take it personally when their partners say things that affect them negatively;
- And finally, they respond positively to their partners bids for emotional connection during these difficult conversations.

So in these difficult times, we can ask, What can we do to strengthen our relationships with our partners?

Well, first we can have five times more positive than negative exchanges. This is important. Avoid tit for tat thinking. You're looking for five times more positives and negatives. And you can do that by expressing admiration and fondness for each other, responding to your partner's bids for emotional connection, talking about things you both value and regularly reminding yourself how much your partner means to you and see them in a positive light and give them the benefit of the doubt.

The second thing you can do is to accept that conflict is inevitable. Develop a good repair system for dealing with conflicts. So when you are having difficult conversations with your partners, begin with a gentle start-up, making time for a calm time and space for repairs, remind yourself that you are best friends, take turns listening to each other, allow your partner to influence your decisions, and keep calm and don't take it personally if your partner loses, and respond to your partner's bids for connection.

So five times more positive than negatives and a good repair system will strengthen your closest relationships. And this is important for everyone working in the health services in these difficult times because without strong supportive relationships, our well-being declines, our immune system functions less efficiently and we're less well able to fight infections. And we will be less proficient professionals.

**AMK** Thank you. In your writing you emphasise positive personality strengths. What are these and how can they be best used by people who are providing care in our health services? And how might these same strengths be used in our home lives?

**Prof Carr** In positive psychology 24 positive personality traits are assessed with the VIA inventory of strengths. Now you can take this inventory of strengths online for free and find out what your top five signature strengths are. Just type (V-I-A) VIA character strengths into Google and you'll find the site. And by the way, signature strengths are your strongest positive personality traits. You see these as central to your character. You like using them and using them boosts your well-being. You can then make a point of using these strengths in as many ways as possible in your day to day life, at work and at home.

Now, teamwork, zest and love of learning are three strengths that many of us in the health professions have. If these are your strengths. Then for teamwork, you may wish to explore new ways you contribute to how well your team does its job at work and how well you and your partner

work as a team at home. For zest, you may wish to explore new ways. You can use your energy and enthusiasm, which are the hallmarks of zest, to do your job better and make your whole life more fulfilling. And for the strength, love of learning, you may wish to find out more things that will help you to work more productively and then at home you may wish to explore a variety of hobbies in your leisure time.

With signature strengths, the key is, first of all, to acknowledge what your strengths are and then continually explore new and different ways to use them in your day to day life. This will increase your work performance and it'll enhance your well-being.

**AMK** In a separate chapter, you summarise all that we know about grit and perseverance. Considering that the COVID-19 crisis will place great demands on individuals and teams over time, what are the main take-aways here?

**Prof Carr** Grit involves focusing on the big picture, selecting a highly valued long term goal and pursuing it with passion and persistence. Most of us in the health professions start out with high level of grit. We need a lot of grit to complete our training, which for most of us takes years and is very demanding. So what are the main research findings about grit?

Well, gritty people view their work as a marathon, not a sprint. So they pace themselves and they cultivate stamina. Really important during the COVID-19 crisis that we all pace ourselves. While disappointment, fatigue or episodes of boredom may lead others to change goals, gritty people see these experiences as signals to persist towards their long term goals, no matter how long it takes.

Interest, practice, purpose and hope - these four things - are the key characteristics of gritty people. Gritty people are passionately interested in their work and so are intrinsically motivated to persevere for a long time. They engage in daily practice to improve their skills so they become better and better at pursuing their overall goal. They see their work as having a purpose, as making a difference for themselves and others and hold a strong conviction that their work matters. Finally, they're hopeful and optimistic that no matter how many setbacks they encounter, they'll overcome them and achieve their long term goal.

And here are some things you can do during the COVID-19 crisis to make you grittier.

- Select a single, highly valued personal long term goal that's connected to resolving to the COVID-19 crises. Expect to work hard towards this goal. Set short and medium term goals to help you achieve your main long term, highly valued goal;
- Say no to goals, projects and activities that would distract you from pursuing a long term goal;
- Develop a work routine that suits you;

• Work at the limits of your competence so that the challenges you face are at the limits of what you're able to do;

- Expect mistakes and setbacks. Think of mistakes and setbacks as signals that you're gaining expertise and so are likely to succeed in the long term;
- Distinguish between setbacks that can be overcome by trying harder, and doing more of the same, and those that can be overcome by changing course and doing something different;
- Grow a network of family, friends and colleagues who understand and support your work;
- And then regularly take stock of all the steps you've taken toward your highly valued long term goal;
- Reflect on how much you enjoy this work;
- Check that you're still on course;
- And reflect on the additional steps you have to take in future to keep your support network going and to achieve your overall goal.

**AMK** Alan, a leading person at the World Health Organization, at the Health Emergencies Programme there, is an Irishman, Michael Ryan. He talks about avoiding the trap of perfectionism when organising the response to health emergencies. Will you talk about the good and bad of perfectionism and how this translates into effective action?

**Prof Carr** We were talking about grit a moment. Now, gritty people are perfectionistic in a very adaptive way. They have high standards. They work hard. And these two things help them achieve their long term goals. In contrast, some people have problematic perfectionism. Now, they have high standards and they work hard, too, just like crazy people. However, they have great difficulty making progress because they criticise themselves excessively for not doing every task perfectly. And this is because they hold deep seated beliefs like I'm only good if my performance is always absolutely perfect and reaches the highest standards.

Now, one of the problems with having these having deep seated beliefs is, every task takes a long time to complete and progress towards long term goals can be very, very slow. Now, the distinction between gritty people and people with problematic perfectionism is true of organisations also. Some organisations respond to crises in a gritty way, while others respond more like problematic perfectionists.

In the current crisis we need all of our health service teams' responses to COVID-19 to be gritty. If our teams become paralysed by problematic perfectionism, then we must all recognise this and take steps to change it. We have to keep high standards, but let go of excessive self-criticism. We have to replace the idea that all aspects of our team's response has to be absolutely perfect with the idea that our crisis management has to be good enough.

**AMK** There are lots of great resources out there on exercise, relaxation and meditation. What do we gain from having a routine for minding our well-being? What does the science tell us?

**Prof Carr** There is a vast body of research which shows that regular daily exercise and regular meditation are good for both physical and mental health. Exercise and meditation have short and long term effects on our physical fitness, physical health and also on our mood and mental health.

Both types of activities, physical exercise and meditation, in different ways, offer time out from the stresses of everyday life.

Physical exercise energises us, makes it fitter, and is associated with longevity. Meditation calms us and is particularly useful for helping us live with worries that arise during the current COVID-19 crisis.

When we meditate, we focus, for example, on the breath, and at the same time we observe in a detached way our worries as they enter the mind and then dissolve. This gives us some distance from these worries, and it prevents us from becoming paralysed by panic.

Both exercise and meditation introduce routine into our daily lives. Routine makes our lives more predictable and therefore less stressful. It's good for our mental health to have a fairly predictable routine for rising in the morning, eating meals during the day, doing work and other activities and going to sleep at night.

In the Positive Psychology & You book - that's the recent book I've done on this stuff - I've included a lot of detailed advice on engaging in regular exercise and meditation, as well as links to useful web-based resources for doing certain meditation exercises and relaxation exercises.

**AMK** And in the same book, you invite the reader to think about what's important to them, what they value most. Why bother and how do you go back doing that?

**Prof Carr** The current crisis is a good opportunity for all of us to step back and think about what matters most to us in our lives, to reflect on the goals that we value most. These sorts of goals are very important. They give our lives meaning, a direction, and they also motivate us. We may have goals to do with our work in the health service. However, we also probably have important goals in other areas of our lives. For example, we may have goals about the kinds of relationships we want to have, how healthy and fit we'd like to be, or what we will achieve in sports, music, arts, politics or leisure pursuits.

You may wish to do this positive psychology exercise to help you clarify your highly-valued goals. It's called the Best Possible Self exercise. And begin by finding a quiet place where you can spend some time in your own 15 or 20 minutes and visualise your best possible self and write about this. Write about who you visualise you would be over the next 10 years if everything in your life goes

as well as it possibly could, and all your hopes are fulfilled in the following areas: your physical and mental health; your relationships with your partner, your family and your friends; your

achievements in your career, work or in your education; and your achievements in leisure activities, sports, arts and other areas of your life.

Now this Best Possible Self exercise will allow you to get clarity about your highly valued goals.

**AMK.** Is there a place for optimism at this at this very difficult time?

**Prof Carr.** Optimism and gratitude are two strengths strongly associated with well-being, and they're two sides of the same coin. These strengths go together because gratitude is about having a positive perspective on the past and the present. And optimism is about having a positive perspective on the future. In these difficult times, it's important for our well-being to maintain a positive perspective. If we have a positive perspective, we experience positive emotions and that's good for us, but it's also good for our patients and colleagues because emotions are contagious.

Now, this is a very well-established psychological phenomenon, emotional contagion. Positive emotions support the of the functioning immune system. And there's also evidence from longitudinal studies that positive affectivity affects longevity. That is, we know that happy people live longer.

For all these of these reasons, optimism and gratitude are vital during the current crisis. So how can we experience gratitude and optimism when the COVID-19 crisis involves so much loss - loss of health, in some cases, loss of life, financial loss and loss of liberty that goes with social distancing and social isolation?

Even with all of these losses, it is possible and vitally important for us to regularly remind ourselves of things that we're grateful for and things that we're optimistic about. We'll get greater benefits from doing this exercise if we remember things that we're grateful for or imagine things that we're optimistic about in a lot of detail so that we can picture these things in our mind's eye. It may help to make these memories and imaginings more vivid if we set aside time to write these things down or describe them to a close friend or partner in great detail.

So, for example, if you're grateful for the wonderful walk you had last weekend along the cliff path in Howth, remember the clear blue sky. Remember the yellow flowers budding on the gorse. The smell of the salt sea air. The wonderful view north to Lambay Island and south towards Bray head and the bright sunlight and the sparkling blue water. And the sound of the seagulls calling. If you're thinking optimistically about something that you expect will turn out well, picture this in your mind's eye. If it's getting towards the end of your working day you may wish to imagine how relaxing it will be when you get home, how good you would feel when you sit down to your evening meal,

how good it would feel when you phone or Skype someone whom you're missing a lot because of the COVID-19 crisis, how good it will feel when you listen to some of your favourite music or read a chapter of the novel you're enjoying.

The COVID-19 crisis, in which we find ourselves today, offers us all an opportunity to think about how grateful we are for all the things we usually take for granted. Seeing our friends and extended family regularly, having a normal work routine, watching or playing sports, going for a drink or a meal or shopping. We can think about how grateful we are for all of these things in great detail and how wonderful it will be in a few months when we can do all of them again. This crisis is an opportunity to be grateful for all that we've had in the past. But it's also an opportunity to be optimistic about recovering some of these wonderful things again.

**AMK** Professor Carr, thank you.