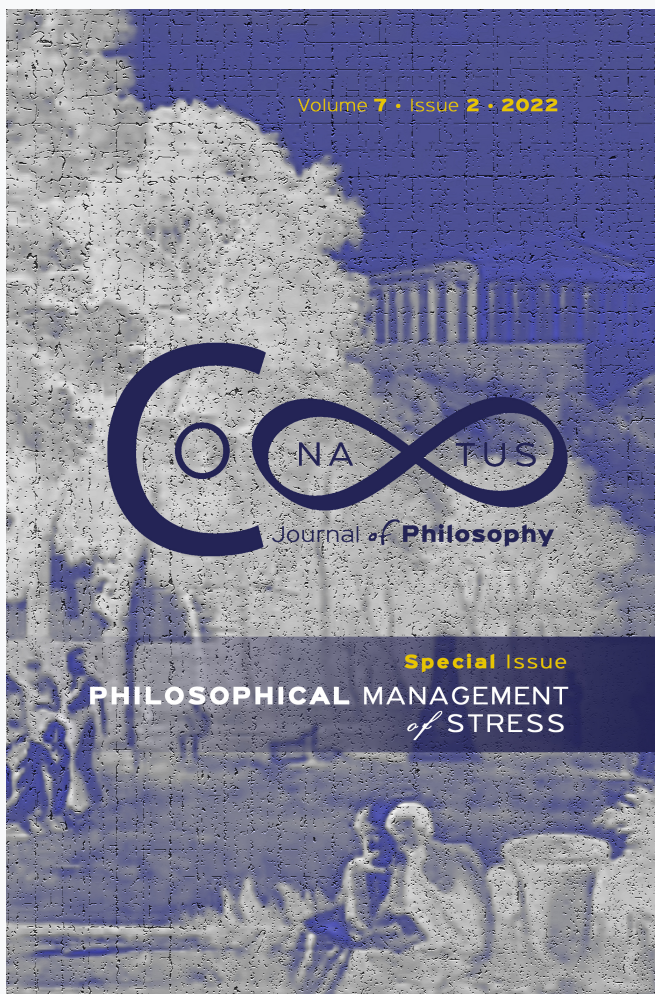


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### Living Happily in the Era of COVID-19: Philosophical and Positive Psychology Intervention in Secondary Education

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# Living Happily in the Era of COVID-19: Philosophical and Positive Psychology Intervention in Secondary Education

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## **Abstract**

*In the coronavirus pandemic crisis, the mental well-being of adolescents was significantly burdened and, in this context, an innovative school intervention program was applied and its effect was investigated. The program involved a structured 11-weeks-long psycho-educational intervention on a sample of 11 Greek high school students (aged 16-17 years), combining principles of Epicurean and Stoic Philosophy with Positive Psychology techniques, aiming at promoting their mental well-being and the effective management of the psychological effects of the pandemic crisis. A qualitative methodology was used for data collection, including triangulation and data enrichment, self-referential demographic questionnaires, focus group and group interviews, semi-structured individual oral interviews and written descriptions and narratives. Before the intervention, the students' needs and expectations were investigated through written narratives and, after the intervention, semi-structured individual oral interviews and group interviews recorded their personal experiences and evaluative judgments. The application of positive techniques of meaning in life, optimism, gratitude and the development of positive relationships, combined with a cognitive reconstruction based on the principles of Epicureanism and Stoicism, had beneficial effects on the participating students, including emotional state improvement, mental well-being enhancement, and improved aspects of quality of life, such as subjective health, cognitive and school performance, family and interpersonal relationships. The highlight of the study was the emergence of the supporting role of Philosophy in the effectiveness of the applied techniques of Positive Psychology in the management of the psychological and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.*

**Keywords:** *positive psychology; Epicureanism; Stoicism; school intervention program; COVID-19; mental well-being*

## I. Introduction

The emergence and rapid spread of the new COVID-19 coronavirus disease since March 2020, when the World Health Organization declared it a pandemic, caused a global health crisis, with serious consequences for both physical and mental health, imposing an unprecedented and long-term social isolation with huge psychological and financial problems. Globally, COVID-19 pandemic itself and the measures imposed by governments have caused enormous social changes, exerting suffocating pressure on individuals, causing enormous psychological distress and bringing about an increase in levels of generalized anxiety and stress, emotional and behavioral disorders, including depressive symptoms and panic, sleep problems and post-traumatic stress.<sup>1</sup>

In this pandemic crisis, adolescents are a population group that needs special attention and care, as the changes due to COVID-19 have significantly burdened their mental well-being. The strict confinement at home brought significant changes to daily lives of adolescents, with serious restrictions on interpersonal relationships and social interactions, but also serious concerns about the prevailing health and financial situation. In terms of school life, adolescents have obliged to adapt quickly to new learning environments, distance learning and distance education, with widespread concerns and uncertainties, especially of final year students, about their studies and their immediate academic future.<sup>2</sup> Increased levels of frustration exert a significant negative effect on adolescents' functioning.<sup>3</sup> Based on the existing literature,

<sup>1</sup> Guanghai Wang, et al., "Mitigate the Effects of Home Confinement on Children during the COVID-19 Outbreak," *The Lancet* 395, no. 10228 (2020): 945-947; Wändi Bruine de Bruin, "Age Differences in COVID-19 Risk Perceptions and Mental Health: Evidence from a National US Survey Conducted in March 2020," *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* 76, no. 2 (2021): e24-e29; Ravi Philip Rajkumar, "COVID-19 and Mental Health: A Review of the Existing Literature," *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 52 (2020): 102066; Joep Van Agteren, et al., "Using Internet-based Psychological Measurement to Capture the Deteriorating Community Mental Health Profile during COVID-19: Observational Study," *Journal of Medical Internet Research Mental Health* 7, no. 6 (2020): e20696; Sarah K. Schäfer, et al., "Impact of COVID-19 on Public Mental Health and the Buffering Effect of a Sense of Coherence," *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 89, no. 6 (2020): 386-392; Rodolfo Rossi, et al., "COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown Measures Impact on Mental Health among the General Population in Italy," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (2020): 790; Asghar Afshar Jahanshahi, et al., "The Distress of Iranian Adults during the Covid-19 Pandemic – More Distressed than the Chinese and with Different Predictors," *Brain Behavior and Immunity* 87 (2020): 124.

<sup>2</sup> Noelia Muñoz-Fernández, and Ana Rodríguez-Meirinhos, "Adolescents' Concerns, Routines, Peer Activities, Frustration, and Optimism in the Time of COVID-19 Confinement in Spain," *Journal of Clinical Medicine* 10, no. 4 (2021): 798.

<sup>3</sup> Jörg M. Fegert, et al., "Challenges and Burden of the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic for Child and Adolescent Mental Health: A Narrative Review to Highlight Clinical and Research Needs in the Acute Phase and the Long Return to Normality," *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*

the application of Positive Psychology Interventions may contribute to addressing the ever-increasing psychological problems. In this context, a study was realized in order to investigate the effect of an innovative school intervention program, a structured psycho-educational intervention lasting 11 weeks on a sample of Lyceum/Secondary School students, combining Positive Psychology techniques and principles of Epicurean and Stoic Philosophy, with the aim of promoting the mental well-being of adolescents and, consequently, the effective management of the psychological effects of the pandemic crisis.

## II. Positive psychology in times of crisis

According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, Positive Psychology focuses on positive subjective state related to well-being and pleasure, connected to the satisfaction one derives from the past, the joy and pleasures experienced in the present and the optimism and hope concerning the future.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, through its interventions, Positive Psychology contributes to the optimistic view of life, to the appreciation of the present, to the acceptance of the past, to the adoption of an attitude of gratitude and forgiveness, to the acquisition of a perspective beyond the momentary pleasures and difficulties of life. The results of Positive Psychology interventions have been studied systematically and highlight their positive correlation with mental health and well-being, and also their duration in time.<sup>5</sup>

In times of crisis, fear and uncertainty make people pessimistic about their future and anxiety and stress seriously threaten their mental health. In these times there is necessity to shift the focus from risk factors, related to the cause of psychological discomfort, to protective factors, related to the prevention and management of mental disorders during difficulties, which can reduce the mental effects they cause, improving mental health.<sup>6</sup> In particular, the interventions and techniques of the

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*and Mental Health* 14, no. 1 (2020): 1-11; Carlo Buzzi, et al., "The Psycho-Social Effects of COVID-19 on Italian Adolescents' Attitudes and Behaviors," *Italian Journal of Pediatrics* 46, no. 1 (2020): 1-7; Lauren Alvis, et al., "Adolescents' Prosocial Experiences during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Associations with Mental Health and Community Attachments," *PsyArXiv Preprints* (2020); İsmail Seçer, and Sümeyye Ulaş, "An Investigation of the Effect of COVID-19 on OCD in Youth in the Context of Emotional Reactivity, Experiential Avoidance, Depression and Anxiety," *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 19, no. 6 (2021): 2306-2319.

<sup>4</sup> Martin E. P. Seligman, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 5-14.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy L. Sin, and Sonja Lyubomirsky, "Enhancing Well-being and Alleviating Depressive Symptoms with Positive Psychology Interventions: A Practice-friendly Meta-analysis," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 65, no. 5 (2009): 467-487.

<sup>6</sup> Gökmen Arslan, and Murat Yildirim, "Coronavirus Stress, Meaningful Living, Optimism, and Depressive Symptoms: A Study of Moderated Mediation Model," *Australian Journal of Psychology* 73, no. 2 (2021): 113-124.

new science of Positive Psychology can contribute to the treatment of emerging psychological problems. Mainly positive variables such as meaning in life, optimism, gratitude, positive relationships can help the individuals significantly.<sup>7</sup>

Meaningful living, optimism, gratitude and positive interpersonal relationships of kindness are very important variables for mental health. More specifically, three types of interactions are confirmed by recent research data during the COVID-19 pandemic: (a) buffering, when positive emotions, positive processes, positive conditions and positive relationships are used to reduce or alleviate mental disorder during the crisis, (b) bolstering, when positive emotions, positive processes, positive conditions and relationships act to maintain mental health despite the difficulties of the crisis, and (c) building, when the individual is able to use the crisis in a transformative way, in order to develop new practices and strategies (e.g. greater powers), new processes (e.g. more self-compassion) and new perspectives (e.g. enhanced meaning in life), which can lead to improved mental health in the future.<sup>8</sup>

In the period of COVID-19 and also in the post-pandemic era, it is imperative to search and find positive techniques and strategies that could be implemented in the schools, in order to enhance the mental health and well-being of students. In order to achieve this goal, the present study was focused on Positive Psychology techniques combined with Philosophy offered to 16-17-year-old senior students of the Lyceum (Greek High School), in which the author serves as a philologist. The inspiration and starting point of the study was the formation of the school's participatory Philosophy Workshop, within the context of the Philosophy course, which functioned as a focus group and at the same time as a psycho-educational group.

In the Philosophy Workshop, because of the mental burden of the participating students due to the pandemic crisis, the study of the respective philosophical issues expanded and inevitably evolved into a philosophical

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<sup>7</sup> Seligman, and Csikszentmihalyi, 5-14; Robert A. Emmons, and Michael E. McCullough, "Counting Blessings versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-being in Daily Life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 2 (2003): 377; Alex M. Wood, et al., "Gratitude and Well-being: A Review and Theoretical Integration," *Clinical Psychology Review* 30, no. 7 (2010): 890-905; Matthew W. Gallagher, and Shane J. Lopez, "Positive Expectancies and Mental Health: Identifying the Unique Contributions of Hope and Optimism," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 4, no. 6 (2009): 548-556; Xanthe Glaw, et al., "Meaning in Life and Meaning of Life in Mental Health Care: An Integrative Literature Review," *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 38, no. 3 (2017): 243-252; John B. Nezlek, et al., "A Daily Diary Study of Relationships between Feelings of Gratitude and Well-being," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12, no. 4 (2017): 323-332; Sara B. Algoe, "Positive Interpersonal Processes," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 28, no. 2 (2019): 183-188; Da Jiang, "Feeling Gratitude is Associated with Better Well-being Across the Life Span: A Daily Diary Study during the COVID-19 Outbreak," *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* 77, no. 4 (2022): e36-e45; Arslan, and Yildirim, 113-124.

<sup>8</sup> Lea Waters, et al., "Positive Psychology in a Pandemic: Buffering, Bolstering, and Building Mental Health," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 17, no. 3 (2022): 303-323.



consultation, based on the Raabe method.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the sharing of personal experiences, thoughts and feelings, based on a secure relationship of warmth and mutual trust, created the framework for the implementation of the Positive Psychology Intervention combined with Philosophy.

### III. Hellenistic philosophies of Epicureanism and Stoicism

The combination of Positive Psychology and Philosophy, developed in this study, is a new approach to the teaching and integration of positive variables in the school context, which aims to strengthen the effectiveness of the specific techniques of Positive Psychology with the assistance of Moral Philosophy.

In the present study a connection of Positive Psychology with Philosophy and Philosophical Counseling has been attempted. In particular, the author tried to connect the positive variables and exercises of the Intervention Program applied with the technique of cognitive restructuring, based on Epicurean and Stoic Philosophy, and mainly on the convergences that the two philosophical approaches present. This intention was based on the reasoning that these two philosophical attitudes to life, despite their differences and contradictions, aimed to establish a stable and good life guide with meaning, principles and moral quality. Consequently, they could be cognitively exploited and contribute to the promotion of mental health and well-being not only of adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, but also of people of all ages and at every stage of life. Furthermore, as it will be thoroughly discussed below, these two schools of thought exerted the greatest influence on the development not only of Philosophical Counseling but also of modern Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.

According to Hadot, "Philosophy is not the construction of a system, but lived experience," which means that it is not an intellectual activity detached from life, it is not just teaching abstracts theories, but it is a constant practical exercise of life.<sup>10</sup> Philosophy, through changing the way of thinking, signals a movement of the self towards self-awareness and understanding of the surrounding world, signals personal fulfillment and self-improvement, allowing the individual to experience inner peace, freedom and bliss, free from turmoil and suffering, caused by human passions, excessive desires, worries and fears. Consequently, philosophy, and especially philosophical counseling, could be a therapeutic method, a therapy for the healing of human mental afflictions. According to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, the purpose of philosophy is actually "healing of the soul."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Peter B. Raabe, *Philosophical Counseling: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publications, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 123; 133.

Epicureanism derived from the philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BC), who founded a school of philosophy in Athens called *Kepon* (Garden). A basic principle of Epicureanism was the pursuit and conquest of happiness (eudaimonia). Epicurus rejected determinism and advocated hedonism (pleasure in life) as the highest good and goal, to which all human endeavors naturally aim. However, Epicureanism does not aim at an unbridled hedonism, but at avoiding physical and mental pain and enjoying the simple pleasures of life. In Epicurean Philosophy, mental pleasure was regarded more highly than physical and the ultimate pleasure was held the freedom from anxiety and mental pain, especially that arising from needless fear of death and of the gods, while pleasure that brings pain must be avoided. It is now believed that Epicurus was the one who actually laid the foundations of philosophy as a therapy.<sup>12</sup> Trying to soothe the mental turmoil of humans, which is basically due to the subconscious fear of death, he was the first existential psychotherapist of humanity, who showed that philosophy can help everybody attain peace of mind and balance through rational consideration and resolution of life's problems.<sup>13</sup> Through scientific knowledge and virtue, mainly through reason/prudence that controls emotions, the goal of life and philosophical pursuit is pleasure and peaceful life, calmness (ataraxia) and happiness (eudaimonia).<sup>14</sup> Epicurus argued that "philosophy is empty of content if it does not cure any human passion."<sup>15</sup>

Stoicism was named from the "Poikili Stoa" (Varied Portico) of Athens, the location of the school of philosophy founded by Zeno of Citium (334-262 BC). The basic principle of Stoicism is that man must accept his fate as designed by divine providence and live virtuously, with moral integrity, temperance, justice, courage and practical wisdom, since his well-being depends on these values. The Stoic man has no dependence on earthly and mortal things, but neither does he deny them. Whether they are pleasant or unpleasant, he simply stands apathetically and impassively towards them, lives with peace of mind, participating, however, at the same time in all aspects of social life; moreover, he would never exchange virtue for the pursuit of pleasure or the avoidance of pain. According to the Stoic philosophers Epictetus, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius philosophy is an art of living well, through teaching ethics and helping a human being to pursue a good life and to manage life's unexpected and

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Arthur Long, *From Epicurus to Epictetus: Studies in Hellenistic and Roman Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 206.

<sup>13</sup> Christos Yapijakis, "Ancestral Concepts of Human Genetics and Molecular Medicine in Epicurean Philosophy," in *History of Human Genetics*, eds. Heike I. Petermann, Peter S. Harper, and Susanne Doetz, 41-57 (Cham: Springer, 2017), 51.

<sup>14</sup> Christos Yapijakis, "Ethical Teachings of Epicurus Based on Human Nature in the Light of Biological Psychology," *Proceedings of the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (2018): 83-88.

<sup>15</sup> Epicurus, cited in Porphyry, Letter to Marcella, 31; Kathleen O'Brien Wicker, *Porphyry the Philosopher to Marcella* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).

dramatic changes, too. With their emphasis on ethics of everyday life, “the Stoics practiced philosophy as an art dedicated to human misery and as a way of examining painful problems.”<sup>16</sup> They believed that philosophy can act as a therapeutic method for the mental diseases and the passions of the soul, such as desire, fear, sorrow and pleasure, always through self-control and self-criticism.

The Epicureans and the Stoics, with a different approach and methodology, practiced with their teaching a kind of counseling, dedicated themselves to the study and *diagnosis* of the problems of the *human condition* and proposed ways for “healing of the soul.” As a result, these two philosophical systems are from Hellenistic times until today remedies for the problems that beset human lives.<sup>17</sup>

According to Epicurus, the aim of Philosophy, is to cure the diseases of the soul, just as medicine cures the diseases of the body. This is also the aim of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), whose origins lie both in Epicureanism and in Stoicism as well.<sup>18</sup> The Hellenistic philosophy had a practical aim and application in everyday human life. For this reason, modern Psychology, and especially Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, recognizes that it owes its philosophical origins to Hellenistic Philosophy, mainly due to its pragmatic character. The American psychologist Albert Ellis, one of the founders of cognitive behavioral therapies, in 1955, introduced, developed and began to apply a new, more active and directive type of psychotherapy, the Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT).<sup>19</sup> In this model, the therapist tries to help the patient to understand that his personal philosophy may contain beliefs that contribute decisively to his emotional pain. The goal of therapy is for the patient to realize the irrationality of some of his/her/its thoughts and to modify them appropriately. A large part of Ellis’s theory “comes from Philosophy rather than Psychology.”<sup>20</sup> According to Robertson, Psychology’s focus on the function of human thought is perhaps “the most core idea in both Stoics and modern Cognitive Behaviorist.”<sup>21</sup>

One of the central/basic principles of CBT is focusing on the present, in the sense of processing and managing a problem in the present, and enjoying the present, which is a basic Epicurean thought. According to the

<sup>16</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 329.

<sup>17</sup> Bellarmine U. Nneji, “Philosophical Counselling/Therapy: Praxis and Pedagogy,” *Working Papers on Culture, Education and Human Development* 9, no. 3 (2013): 4-8.

<sup>18</sup> Raymond A. DiGiuseppe, et al., *A Practitioner’s Guide to Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Paulo Knapp, and Aaron T. Beck, “Cognitive Therapy: Foundations, Conceptual Models, Applications and Research,” *Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry* 30, s. 2 (2008): s54-s64.

<sup>20</sup> Albert Ellis, *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy: A Comprehensive Method of Treating Human Disturbances* (New York: Citadel Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Donald Robertson, *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT): Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 53.



Epicureans, the enjoyment of the present requires the elimination of any stress of everyday life, wherever it comes from, even the stress that stems from the thought and fear of our imminent death.<sup>22</sup> However, all anxieties are actually directly related to thoughts about the future and, according to Beck, stem from “a projection of ourselves into a future state of danger, which does not currently exist.”<sup>23</sup> For this reason, the Epicureans and the Stoics agreed that the present is the only true reality, where a human has the possibility of action and change. The Stoic Seneca preserves the Epicurean thought that “a foolish life is empty of gratitude, full of anxiety and focused entirely on the future.”<sup>24</sup>

Ultimately, for both the Epicureans and the Stoics, happiness is found in the acceptance of the inevitability of death. Life is a human’s unique property in an indifferent universe (according to the Epicureans) or in a cosmic system of things (according to the Stoics), and the human can experience it, change, shape and improve it.<sup>25</sup> But in order to manage the important present of life, self-awareness is required, which can be strengthened with CBT techniques, such as the management of dysfunctional beliefs.<sup>26</sup>

#### IV. Hellenistic philosophies and Positive Psychology

A fundamental principle of Positive Psychology is that emotions are normal/natural, valid and important components of life. The importance of emotions is also emphasized by Epicurean Philosophy. For Epicurus, pleasure-pain feelings (passions) are among the four criteria of truth. The other three criteria concern the senses, the concepts (preconceptions or apprehensions) and the insightful apprehension of mind (imaginary imposition of the intellect). The emotions of pleasure and of pain are safe criteria of truth regarding the stimuli of the natural environment, since everything that pleases us is good for our nature and everything that creates pain and agitation is hostile to us. In addition, emotions are also criteria for choosing the right actions and avoiding the wrong ones, always with the aim of the blissful life.<sup>27</sup>

For the Epicureans, “the most important component of happiness is the

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<sup>22</sup> Robert W. Sharples, *Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics. An Introduction to Hellenistic Philosophy* (London, and New York: Routledge, 2003), 74-76.

<sup>23</sup> Aaron T. Beck, “The Current State of Cognitive Therapy: A 40-year Retrospective,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 62, no. 9 (2005): 953-959.

<sup>24</sup> Yapijakis, “Ethical Teachings of Epicurus,” 86.

<sup>25</sup> Sharples, 110; 181.

<sup>26</sup> DiGiuseppe, et al., 33-39.

<sup>27</sup> Yapijakis, “Ancestral Concepts of Human Genetics;” Yapijakis, “Ethical Teachings of Epicurus,” 83-88.

mood, of which only we are sovereign,” according to Diogenes of Oenoanda.<sup>28</sup> This position is consistent with Positive Psychology which aims to cultivate a positive way of thinking, with the goal of increasing one’s positive emotions and decreasing negative ones. Emotional turmoil, caused by the reasonless part of the soul, can only be dealt with by prudence (practical wisdom), Epicurus points out.

Furthermore, although Stoics disregard emotions as useless and indifferent to virtue, they believe that the emotions are not caused from various external conditions but spring from human thought itself. The difficulties in life are not necessarily sources of stress if our way of thinking does not make them stressful. Epictetus always points out that “people are disturbed not by things, but by their beliefs about things,” emphasizing that everything begins in human thought and is connected to the way of thinking. In *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius states: “Today I escaped from all difficult situations. I probably pushed away all the difficult situations. Because they were not outside of me, but within me, in the idea I form about things,”<sup>29</sup> “because everything is as one perceives it.”<sup>30</sup>

One of the Positive Psychology strategies Stoicism offers is focusing on what we can control.<sup>31</sup> For the Stoics, a basic condition for a peaceful and undisturbed life is the realization that human life is made up of the things that one can control and those that lie beyond personal control. According to Epictetus, it is practically impossible for us to control all the events of our life, but it is possible for us to control the way we react to them, to control our thoughts and beliefs. Otherwise, the attempt to exert complete control over the external deterministic reality is usually unsuccessful, causing insecurity and anger. Consequently, focusing on what one can control is an effective strategy for reducing stress and negative emotions, and enhancing personal autonomy in crisis situations.

These positions are also in agreement with the Epicureans, who praised the importance of personal freedom and of personal responsibility for human actions and behaviors. Epicurus repeats many times with emphasis that “our behaviors and also the stimuli of the environment sometimes depend only on us and on our perceptions.”<sup>32</sup> “In most cases we ourselves are responsible and only in a few cases of life does chance intervene,” Diogenes of Oenoanda

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<sup>28</sup> Diogenes of Oenoanda, Fragment 113.

<sup>29</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 9: 13.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 15.

<sup>31</sup> William B. Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Epicurus, *On Nature*, 25 A 1-15.

states.<sup>33</sup> Epicurus emphasizes that “our life does not need absurdity and foolish opinions, but calmness.”<sup>34</sup> People should learn to use their emotions as criteria of truth for real external conditions but also to avoid magnifying negative emotions, by focusing only on the issues they can control and always directing their energies there; besides not feeling anxious about things that are not in our personal control and accepting the past and the present as inevitable, as we cannot change them, but focus instead on the future which depends on us also.

The Epicurean and Stoic concept of the mental preparation to face difficulties in life is found in Positive Psychology in the conceptual framework of mental resilience, which refers to “a dynamic process of positive adaptation to adversity.”<sup>35</sup> The Stoics say that humans must always be prepared for the greatest difficulties of life, so that they will not despair, when these difficulties arise. Marcus Aurelius considers that man must be mentally prepared for the unexpected and sudden events of life, “ready and unshakable for those that happen without warning.”<sup>36</sup> And one should expect everything in life and not be sorry at all, since “everything that happens is common and familiar like the rose in spring and the fruit in summer; so are sickness and death and everything that makes the fools happy or sad.”<sup>37</sup> Stoics point out the value of patience and the brave courage in the face of difficulties, which does not allow one to become mentally alienated from virtue. Marcus Aurelius writes: “Perhaps what is happening to you prevents you from being just, magnanimous, moderate, knowledgeable, careful in judgment, unfeigned, modest, generous?”<sup>38</sup> The Stoic sage must have self-control and self-discipline, courage, moderation and ratio, which will protect him so that he does not succumb to negative emotions, such as anxiety, fear, sadness or anger; even when it is necessary to mourn, he will do so in moderation.<sup>39</sup>

The Epicurean philosophy, on the other hand, advises humans of every age not to deal with many things or to attempt difficult things, pushing themselves beyond their capabilities, as all this brings turmoil to human nature.<sup>40</sup> Epicurus

<sup>33</sup> Diogenes of Oenoanda, Fragment 132.

<sup>34</sup> Epicurus, *Letter to Pythocles*; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 10: 87; Yapijakis, *Epicurean Philosophy*.

<sup>35</sup> Suniya S. Luthar, et al., “The Construct of Resilience: A Critical Evaluation and Guidelines for Future Work,” *Child Development* 71, no. 3 (2000): 547.

<sup>36</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 7: 61.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 4: 43.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 4: 49.

<sup>39</sup> Irvine, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Diogenes of Oenoanda, Fragment 113.

exhorts humans not to be competitive neither indulge in rivalries, as “there is no need of unnatural and unnecessary things obtained by rivalries.” On the contrary, “whoever has understood the limits of life, knows well how attainable are all those things that drive away the pain of deprivation and make life perfect in its entirety.”<sup>41</sup> “The good is easily acquired,” Philodemus of Gadara reminds us in the four-part remedy *tetrapharmakos*.<sup>42</sup>

In any case, the human virtues recommended by both the Epicureans and the Stoics for a happy and peaceful life are included in Positive Psychology’s elements (6 virtues and 24 potentials), described in the Values in Action-Classification of Strengths and Virtues.<sup>43</sup> Between the virtues and the potentials are knowledge and wisdom, broad-mindedness, courage and bravery, integrity, humanity, friendship and caring for others, love, kindness and social intelligence, justice, temperance, forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-regulation and self-control, i.e., controlling our instincts and behaviors, appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope and a sense of purpose.

Regarding the pleasures of life, Positive Psychology, as already mentioned, does not advocate an unrestrained hedonism, a position with which Epicurean Philosophy agrees. Epicurus reminds us that “no pleasure is bad itself, but the results of some pleasures bring much more trouble than pleasures.”<sup>44</sup> For that reason, sometimes we have to choose to avoid a pleasure if we foresee that it will lead to greater pain, or we choose a pain, if we predict that it will lead to greater pleasure. Epicurus characteristically says: “We do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we avoid many pleasures, when they result in more discomfort for us (than pleasure).”<sup>45</sup> For a happy life, according to the Epicureans, the *tetrapharmakos* (τετραφάρμακος) must be applied: “God is not fearful, death is not perceived, good is easily obtained, evil is easily endured.”<sup>46</sup>

## V. Methodology of the Positive Psychology intervention combined with philosophy

A structured psycho-educational intervention named “Living Happily in the Era of COVID-19,” and based on Positive Psychology and Philosophy

<sup>41</sup> Epicurus. *Principal Doctrines*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Philodemus. *To Sophists*, 4: 7.

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Peterson, “The Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths,” in *A Life Worth Living: Contributions to Positive Psychology*, eds. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Isabella Selega Csikszentmihalyi, 29-48 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>44</sup> Epicurus. *Principal Doctrines*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Epicurus. *Letter to Menoecus*. Diogenes Laertius, 10: 129.

<sup>46</sup> Philodemus, *To Sophists*, 4: 7.

was applied as a qualitative study research to 16-17-year-old students of a Lyceum (Greek High School) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was implemented for the fulfillment of the requirement of a thesis for the Master degree program “Mental Health Promotion – Prevention of Psychiatric Disorders” in the Department of Psychiatry at the School of Medicine of the National Kapodistrian University of Athens.

The purpose of that research was to detect the effect promoting the students’ mental well-being by answering the following questions:

- How do the students who participated in the positive intervention evaluate the necessity of the intervention during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to their individual needs, goals, expectations, and also their experience of participating in it?
- How do they evaluate the impact of the intervention on their mental well-being?
- How do they evaluate the impact of the intervention on key aspects of their quality of life, such as physical health, way of thinking, cognitive domain and school performance, interpersonal relationships, family and social life?
- What specific benefits do they feel they have gained from participating in the intervention both in dealing with the current pandemic and in managing potential difficulties in the future?

The positive intervention was implemented in the period January-March 2021 and lasted 11 weeks.<sup>47</sup> Because of the COVID-19, the schools were closed, so the intervention was implemented online via Webex. It was preceded by the basic ethical principle of informed consent in research signed by the student’s parents after appropriate discussion.<sup>48</sup>

The present research based on a qualitative methodology as more appropriate and advantageous, in accordance with the specific research issue and purpose.<sup>49</sup> The study used a combination of (a) convenience sampling and

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<sup>47</sup> Sin, and Lyubomirsky, 467-487; Sonja Lyubomirsky, et al., “Pursuing Happiness: The Architecture of Sustainable Change,” *Review of General Psychology* 9, no. 2 (2005): 111-131; Amanda Fenwick-Smith, et al., “Systematic Review of Resilience-enhancing, Universal, Primary School-based Mental Health Promotion Programs,” *BMC Psychology* 6, no. 1 (2018): 1-17.

<sup>48</sup> John W. Creswell, *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002); Colin Robson, *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).

<sup>49</sup> Philip Darbyshire, et al., “Multiple Methods in Qualitative Research with Children: More Insight or just More?” *Qualitative Research* 5, no. 4 (2005): 417-436; Fenwick-Smith, et al., 1-17.



(b) purposive homogenous sampling criterion.<sup>50</sup> According to the research plan, the Positive Intervention was applied to a focus group and its effect was investigated by capturing the experiences of group members.<sup>51</sup> The initial sample of participants in the study consisted of 13 students, 2 boys, who eventually dropped out, and 11 girls. The sample was selected with eligibility criteria: (a) attending the Second Grade of Lyceum (16-17 years old) and (b) voluntary participation in the school Philosophy Workshop, which was set up under the supervision of the researcher, in the context of the Philosophy course. In the present study, the school's participatory Philosophy Workshop, in which the intervention was implemented, functioned as both an intervention group and a focus group, while no control group was used.

In the study, multiple data collection tools and multiple assessment methods were used for the better evaluation of the school intervention program, for the triangulation and enrichment of research data.<sup>52</sup> Particularly, they were used: (1) a self-report questionnaire to record the demographic characteristics of the female students in the sample, (2) a focus group and group interviews (3) semi-structured individual interviews before the intervention and after the intervention to evaluate its effectiveness, (4) written descriptions and narratives.<sup>53</sup>

The interviews, the written descriptions and narratives before the intervention they aimed to capture: (1) the emotional state of female students during the pandemic, ongoing confinement and social isolation, (2) the effects of the pandemic on key aspects of their quality of life, such as physical health, cognitive domain and school performance, way of thinking, interpersonal relationships, family and social life, (3) the ways and strategies of managing the pandemic and social isolation, (4) the needs and expectations of female students from their participation in the intervention.

After the completion of the intervention program, it was evaluated by the 11 participating female students, through semi-structured individual interviews as well as group interviews-discussions in the focus group, where the personal experiences and evaluations of the female students regarding the results of the intervention were recorded. The questions of the interviews were grouped into four thematic axes, according to the research questions: (a) questions related to the general evaluation of the positive intervention, (b) investigation and recording of the opinions of the female students on the effect of the intervention on their emotional state, (c) questions about the effect of

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<sup>50</sup> Creswell; Robson.

<sup>51</sup> David L. Morgan, and Richard A. Krueger, *The Focus Group Guidebook* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998); Fenwick-Smith, et al., 1-17.

<sup>52</sup> Darbyshire, et al., 417-436; Fenwick-Smith, et al., 1-17.

<sup>53</sup> Morgan, and Krueger; Fenwick-Smith, et al., 1-17; Robson.

the intervention on key aspects of their quality of life and (d) questions about the benefits the female students had obtained from their participation in the intervention. The questions were based on the WHOQOL-100 questionnaire regarding physical, mental, emotional and social well-being/well-being.<sup>54</sup> The semi-structured oral one-on-one interviews were conducted online via Skype or Webex and lasted approximately 50-60 minutes on average.

After granting relevant permission by the students' parents, the interviews were audio recorded, relevant observations of the researcher were recorded in an interview data recording protocol, and, subsequently, transcribed verbatim, to ensure the accuracy and validity of the research process. This was followed by the processing of the oral and written data, their tabulation based on the questions of the interview guide, the detailed coding and thematic analysis of the content of all written and oral texts, their detailed presentation and interpretation. All the necessary conditions were strictly observed, in order to ensure and strengthen the reliability and validity of the present research.<sup>55</sup>

## VI. Implementation of the Positive Psychology intervention program

The Positive Psychology Intervention Program was implemented in a Philosophy Workshop of the school, in which 11 female students voluntarily participated. Because of the pandemic, the positive program was: (a) focused, with specific targeting, and not holistic, applied to the whole school or to a school class, (b) structured, (c) adapted to the contemporary situation of the pandemic, (d) a combination of different positive psychological variables and exercises.

In the Philosophy Workshop, gradually the study of philosophical issues had expanded and inevitably evolved into a philosophical counseling process, largely based on the method of Philosophical Counseling of Raabe's 5 stages.<sup>56</sup> In this context, the ideal condition was created, cognitively and emotionally, for the integration of the Positive Psychology Intervention framed by Epicureanism and Stoicism. The positive intervention was preeminently based on Positive Education model of the Geelong Grammar School, which suggests the Embedding Positive Education in teaching the subjects of the school curriculum.<sup>57</sup> Based on this model, the Positive Psychology Intervention in

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<sup>54</sup> "WHOQOL: Measuring Quality of Life," *World Health Organization*, accessed November 15, 2022, <https://www.who.int/tools/whoqol>.

<sup>55</sup> Robson.

<sup>56</sup> Raabe.

<sup>57</sup> Martin E. P. Seligman, et al., "Positive Education: Positive Psychology and Classroom Interventions," *Oxford Review of Education* 35, no. 3 (2009): 293-311; Dianne A. Vella-Brodick, et al., *An Evaluation of Positive Education at Geelong Grammar School: A Snapshot of 2013* (Melbourne: The University of Melbourne, 2014).

the Philosophy Workshop was integrated into Moral Philosophy, which is a thematic unit of the Philosophy course of the Lyceum 2<sup>nd</sup> grade class.

Specifically, the female students in the philosophy group were asked to explore the relationship of Ethical Philosophy to eudaimonia, studying the Epicurean and the Stoic philosophical approach, in light of recent research on the human brain, pleasure and altruism, but also under the crisis of the pandemic and its consequences on mental health. Thus, in the Philosophy Workshop a fruitful connection was made between Positive Psychology interventions and techniques, with the timeless, existential and ethical, philosophical issues dealt with by the two most important schools of thought of ancient Greek philosophy, Epicureanism and Stoicism. In particular, the Workshop was structured around the four main themes-variables and techniques of Positive Psychology, related to the meaning of life, enjoyment, gratitude, optimism and positive relationships, which are also highlighted in the Moral Philosophy of the Epicureans and the Stoics.

The intervention was implemented in 11 weekly online meetings via Webex, with basic teaching and learning techniques: (a) counseling, (b) presentation, (c) goal-directed and organized discussion, (d) questioning, (e) writing texts and (f) artistic creation. Table 1 shows the content of the 11 weekly online meetings.

## VII. Results of the Positive Psychology intervention program

The Positive Psychology Intervention Program combined with Philosophy was highly successful based on its overall evaluation by the students, its impact on mental well-being, its impact on quality of life (way of thinking, physical-subjective health, cognitive and academic performance, interpersonal relationships in family and social life), as well as the utility of the philosophical framing of Positive Psychology intervention. An analysis of the results follows.

**1. Evaluation of the Positive Intervention program.** All 11 participating female students unanimously recognized the necessity and importance of the Intervention in the “pressing” and “sad” period of COVID-19. With a feeling of satisfaction, they characterized the intervention as a “break,” a “breath of rest, joy, safety and calm,” which helped them to “endure the second quarantine,” positively affecting their thinking and emotional state. A common point of the responses of 9 girls was that the Program, through the combination of Philosophy and Psychology, had generally responded to their needs and had fulfilled their initial goals and expectations, acting supportive, reinforcing, liberating and psychotherapeutic, but also as a means of self-awareness: “I liked the program, because it combined lessons, discussion

philosophy and psychotherapy,” “it helped me to be strong,” “it taught me where to find support,” “I wanted to get rid of all that pandemic anxiety and pressure, and I largely succeeded it.”

Grading the program on a scale of 1-5, 7 students expressed their absolute satisfaction with a 5, 2 scored a 4, while 2 scored a 3. The final average score of the Program was 4.3.

**2. Impact on mental well-being.** Before the Intervention, a wide range of negative emotions were recorded in the written texts of all the girls. Specifically, the students had reported anxiety, fear and stress, but also frustration, pessimism, melancholy, sadness, sometimes anger or guilt, and, consistently, a lack of satisfaction with life. After the Intervention, a common point of their answers was that a positive effect was on their psychology, contributing to their mental strengthening in the midst of the pandemic and the ongoing restrictions. Most of them admitted that the negative emotions they had reported before the Intervention had been reduced, subsided and, in many cases, had been changed and replaced by positive emotions or simply controlled by rational thinking.

The 7 female students, who had evaluated the intervention with grade 5, admitted that they were “happy,” “regardless of the difficult situation,” “trying to remain as unaffected as possible,” “optimistic,” “strong” and “committed to their goals.” The same students felt that the program had helped them to have “more positive emotions, and less negative ones,” “thinking more optimistically about life,” and “feeling that they could do better” in the difficulties they faced in the midst of a pandemic. In fact, they felt that they were “happier and stronger compared to most of their peers,” as well as “compared to the period of incarceration before the intervention.” One of the answers is representative: “Yes, I am happy with who I am and what I have at the moment.”

Of the remaining 4 female students, 2, although they were skeptical about the concept and the presence of ‘happiness’ in their lives, recognized the positive effect of the Intervention in improving their mental mood compared to the previous situation and their peers: “I’m in a better psychological state than the others,” “I’m definitely in a better mood, I do more pleasant things, I enjoy more beautiful moments, but I don’t know if this should be called ‘happiness,’” “I feel stronger and more optimistic, I’ve started to appreciate a lot of things I previously took for granted, but I think I’m a long way from being ‘happy.’”

The remaining 2 female students considered that the Program’s effect on their mental state was sometimes positive and “helpful,” and sometimes “neutral” or “a little.”

In most cases the emotions of worry, anxiety and fear, although they did not completely eliminate and sometimes were still present, nevertheless showed qualitative and quantitative reduction, which was more related to mental processing and rationalization: “I don’t need to worry about

something I can't control myself," "now I try not to think negatively, I try to think something pleasant," "I can't keep thinking about what will happen in the future and lose the present [...]. I realized that my anxiety had created more problems for myself and others, and I could not solve anyone [...]," "I was worried about a lot, about myself, about my studies, about my family, but now I don't feel so anxious and I'm less afraid."

Regarding the negative emotions of disappointment, frustration, pessimism and sadness, which the students had described before the intervention, their answers showed that these emotions had subsided, decreased and, in some cases, had been eliminated. And, although the negative feelings still existed, these ones were framed by rational thoughts and had qualitatively changed: "I don't get upset like before," "it's not the end of the world," "I don't feel the sadness I used to feel, I'm fine."

Negative emotions in most cases had been replaced by positive emotions. Mainly the positive emotions that female students reported experiencing were "deep satisfaction with life," "optimism," "adequacy" and "fullness," "enjoyment," and "joy for all that is good in life," "balance," "tranquility" and "happiness." In addition, the intense feeling of unfreedom and oppression that they had experienced strongly before, due to remote education and restrictions, had subsided after the Intervention, while their adaptability to the existing situation had improved: "The quarantine and all the prohibitions bother me, but I sometimes think that I have no reason to feel imprisoned when I have so much to do, so many choices," "I'm handling all this pressure much better [...] it's the least I can do when so many people are sick and dying around me [...], at least I have my family and my friends."

Out of the total of 11 female students, only 4 reported that they still had difficulty controlling their anxieties and fears despite trying to rationalize these feelings, repeatedly capturing the difficulty of rationally processing the emotion. In addition, despite the improvement in their psychology, sometimes they felt pessimistic and sad: "I've been helped enough, I definitely think differently, but I can't help but feel sad when. [...]," "when I feel anxious or sad, I try to think positively, to think of what we've learned, but it's not always easy [...], I'm generally in a better mood, but sometimes it gets me down."

**3. Impact on quality of life.** The Intervention had a significant effect on all studied aspects of quality of life of the female students (way of thinking, physical-subjective health, cognitive and academic performance, interpersonal relationships in family and social life). More specifically:

(a) The way of thinking. The results of the cognitive restructuring were impressive as the 11 students admitted that their way of thinking had changed



a lot, although the Intervention had not affected them emotionally to the same extent and it did not have the same positive effects on all of them. Even the female students who had been somewhat skeptical of the positive effects of the Intervention Program on their psychology admitted its positive effect on their way of thinking. All the girls, regardless of the emotional impact of the Positive Intervention, had internalized that how one thinks inevitably affects one's emotions and behavior. They had learned to focus and appreciate what they have and not to focus on what they have lost, and above all to be prepared for the changes in life, trying to rationalize the things that happen and especially the adverse situations: "I have changed my way of thinking," "I understood that everything I feel comes from my mind," "it depends on me what I feel and I try to control it, to see it in a different way," "we have to be prepared for life difficulties," "now I think I have everything I need, while other people have lost more," "I was very unhappy before but I'm not anymore, because I am thinking that my problems are not more serious than the problems of others."

Some female students mainly referred to the issue of personal freedom and choice as a basic condition for their personal happiness: "I am very influenced mainly by the philosophical idea of personal freedom and choice, that we cannot always avoid pain or fear, but we can choose not to dwell on them and go further," "it is up to us to look for the pleasure, the positive element, the positive feeling, the positive thought, especially when we face difficulties, instead of being sad, we can choose to live with joy, with optimism, with calmness, I think that was the most important lesson."

Some other female students addressed the issue of happiness, referring to a personal understanding of both what happiness is and how to pursue and achieve it by focusing on the truly important and meaningful things in life, which requires mature thinking and prudence; female students reiterated that happiness is a personal *decision*, it depends on the way of thinking and beliefs, and it concerns the individual's personal disposition to shape the social environment and not to be influenced by it: "I understood what it means to be happy and how we can be happy. I learned that our happiness depends on our beliefs, so if we change the way of thinking, we'll change our beliefs about what is important or not, in this way it's not difficult to be happy," "I decided to appreciate, to recognize the full worth of what I have and not desire what I don't have, it's good to have dreams and desires, but not for unnecessary and useless things," "I think that most of us have in our life the most important things," "with the program I learned how to feel freer from anxiety, fear, distress, and how to be happier," "if I get rid of useless things, useless people, useless desires, useless thoughts, I think then I will be very happy, it's the only way," "I don't have to wait to get rich to be happy, nor to get good grades,

to get excellent in all subjects, to be loved by everyone,” “everything changes and it can upset and stress us, but we can’t to connect our good mood always with what is happening in our environment, we must have a stability, otherwise we will always be unhappy.”

(b) Physical-subjective health. Before the Intervention, in their written narratives all the female students had mentioned physical discomforts and symptoms, which they experienced more or less frequently, with greater or lesser duration and intensity. These symptoms were mainly fatigue, insomnia or poor-quality sleep with bad dreams and nightmares, headaches, back and lower back pain, abdominal pain, tachycardia, sweating and shortness of breath.

After the Intervention, according to the answers of the students, an improvement was observed in their subjective health, a reduction of physical discomforts or even their elimination in some cases. The students reported that the quality of sleep had improved, they did not have frequent bad dreams, nor did they wake up suddenly during the night. However, regardless of the improvement in sleep quality, they still experienced a constant “fatigue.” Headaches and backaches remained bothersome to almost all of the students, who attributed them to the long hours of online classes and the fatigue caused by distance learning. However, after the Positive Intervention none of them reported abdominal pain, tachycardia, sweating or shortness of breath, and, according to their reports, headaches had decreased in frequency.

(c) Cognitive field and academic performance. Before the Positive Psychology Intervention Program, the narratives of the female students showed that the pandemic with the social restrictions and distance education had very seriously affected the cognitive domain as well as their school performance. All students confessed to experiencing lack of concentration and distraction, memory problems, lack of clarity of thought, inability to do school homework and solve problems, sleepiness in the class or withdrawing from it and preoccupation with something else, such as Facebook, lack of interest in school, and also lower performance compared to the previous school year.

After the Positive Psychology Intervention Program, the female students realized that their memory and the level of attention and concentration in the school lessons had improved, while they had gained greater clarity in thinking and generally greater interest in school and learning: “I attend the school lessons more systematically,” “I am more focused on the school,” “I am not so absent-minded/abstracted like before.”

Also, it is noteworthy that 3 students began to deal more with “extracurricular” reading, choosing literary and philosophical texts, even though they would follow science and not humanity studies.

In general, the girls reported that they were “doing better in school than before.” Even some female students, who were just processing their school

obligations/duties without any particular academic goals, declared that they “began to be more interested” in the course of Philosophy, and also in Modern Greek Language and Literature. In addition, there were responses that showed a new commitment to academic goals, confidence in individual strengths and a more optimistic outlook on the future: “I found myself again, I remembered what I want to achieve and I will work hard for it,” “I started again to read,” “the pandemic one day will pass and I don’t want to have lost opportunities because of my weakness.”

(d) Interpersonal relationships, family and social life. Before the Positive Intervention Program, the schoolgirls as a whole had reported discomfort and problems from the prolonged, daily, forced coexistence in the same places with the other family members. The limitation of freedom of movement and the absence of living space and privacy, according to the students, often caused tension and conflicts, burdening the already existing psychological problems.

After the Intervention, the responses showed an emotional shift, a mood of greater tolerance and an effort on the part of the majority of girls to positively frame, understand and justify some attitudes and behaviors of their parents. Some responses show the girls’ appreciation for their parents’ contribution, but also the effort to take advantage of the opportunity to get closer and share experiences: “They have their own problems,” “I don’t want to burden them with more worries, theirs are arriving,” “I saw that it was an opportunity for us to get closer,” “they are trying to offer me everything they can, to support me, to give me courage.”

Generally, most schoolgirls reported that they had “developed new ways of communicating with their family,” they were talking more with their parents and siblings, “they were hugging a little more often” and “many times a day,” although “things weren’t perfect” and “sometimes there were fights, too.” Some students attributed their change in behavior to Gratitude Letters they had written to family members. One student admitted that “the quarantine was very difficult” for her and added:

Before I felt lonely, but I didn’t want at all to leave my room and meet anyone of my family, I didn’t even want to talk to them [...], now everything is definitely better, we spend more quality time together, playing board games and telling jokes, we are laughing more, we even dance on Saturday night with the music programs on television, and we have a good time.

Another student commented that the Positive Intervention Program had helped her “significantly,” saying that:

I am bothered by many things at home, but I realized that it is very important that I am not alone, I have my parents and my siblings in my life, so I'm not complaining as much as before.

Another one acknowledged that her relationship with her parents had improved: "I stopped taking out my stress on others, especially on my parents, we are generally communicating better."

Some female students "taught," as they said, the other family members the positive exercises, which they had applied themselves during the Intervention, or shared with them many of the experiences they had in the participatory Philosophy Workshop. Their answers showed that all these activities worked as feedback for themselves: "When I give courage to my sister, I also feel more optimistic and stronger," "she gives me self-confidence." Nevertheless, there were 2 students, whose responses showed that there was not any improvement in relations with parents or siblings, and testified to the existence of fatigue, the absence of any tolerance and endurance for coexistence in the home.

In terms of relationships with peers, friends and classmates, the responses converged on the fact that "despite the quarantine," the girls remained connected, still communicating digitally and sharing activities, lessons, exchanging messages on mobiles and social media. However, from their answers it was found that the Intervention had an effect on all 11 girls, which contributed to a qualitative differentiation in the relationships with their peers.

More specifically, some students said that the intervention had influenced the conversations with their friends, enriching and deepening their topics. At the same time they recognized a qualitative change in their interpersonal relationships, which made these relationships deeper and more meaningful: "We are talking about other things besides of school, more essentially, topics we had not been concerned with in the past, such as philosophy, the meaning of life, death," "we are talking about the lessons we've learned from the pandemic, about our feelings and our thoughts," "I think we got to know each other better."

Also, some other answers show the intellectual and emotional maturation of the girls, which had an impact on the revision of their interpersonal relationships: "I think that I suddenly grew up and the jokes we made between us are not enough for me," "some of my friends seem not adequate for me and my needs," "I've started to distance myself from toxic people who haven't noticed what's going on around them and I wonder how we hung out so much before, we have nothing in common."

In addition, some students reported that they were trying to give courage, strength and optimism to their friends, giving them, as well as their family, to

do some of the positive exercises, while at the same time sharing with them, as with the family, many of the experiences they had in the participatory Philosophy Workshop.

#### **4. Utility of the philosophical framing of Positive Intervention Program.**

All the students admitted that they had gained some benefits, such as: positive emotions (“I try to see the positive, optimistic and cheerful side of things,” “we can see opportunities in difficulties”), self-awareness (“I got to know better me and the others around me,” “I realized that in fact I cause my negative emotions, it is my fault”), self-confidence (“I believe more in my own strengths,” “I realized that, if I want to, I can be strong”), self-efficacy (“I think I can cope better what happens”), mental resilience, rational thinking, better management and control of things (“I’ve learned to manage everything that happens with rationale and calm”), adaptability abilities “to changes and difficulties,” but also a strong sense of purpose (“in the Program I learned that even in difficult times I have to set goals, to focus on them and to try hard to achieve them, this is the only way I can control my life and manage negative emotions”). In addition, some girls repeated that they could deal more effectively with situations that caused anxiety, stress or depressive symptoms (“I can deal with both the anxiety and sadness I used to feel,” “I can focus on the things I love even when there is pressure around me,” “I am very happy that I participated in the Program, because in this crisis and depression I put my thoughts and feelings in order, and I feel both calm and happy about it”).

As for the usefulness of positive techniques and exercises of the Intervention, the students generally expressed only positive views. All 11 focused on the importance of the positive techniques Gratitude Letter, Letter from the Future and Three Good Things/Positive Events. Nine referred to Mental Abstraction, 8 to the Gratitude Diary and Positive Past Moments, 5 referred to the Smart Goals and Acts of Kindness, and there were 3 references to the exercises One Door Closes Another Door Opens and The Best Possible Self/The Best Future Self.

About the necessity of Philosophy in the implementation of Positive Intervention Program, all the answers were remarkable. The students considered that it is absolutely necessary to connect Philosophy with Psychology, as they realized their basic common principles. They emphasized the great correlation of psychological and philosophical topics and problems, and mainly the common goals, which concern the pursuit and achievement of human happiness. Also, they referred to the relationship between Philosophy and Science, to the philosophical origins of Positive Psychology, to the cognitive role of Philosophy and to the cognitive reconstruction achieved through it, to the practical and experiential application of philosophical



principles through Positive Psychology. In general, they emphasized the reinforcing role of Philosophy in the effectiveness of Positive Psychology techniques.

More specifically, regarding Philosophy the students mentioned: “I realized that Philosophy and Psychology are related to each other, they are not two different things, they have a connection, there is an interdependence between them,” “with Philosophy I understood the reason why positive exercises are done, what they are based upon, what Psychology is generally based on,” “Philosophy is about our beliefs, and if we change our beliefs, our psychology changes too,” “I don’t know if the Program would be better or worse without Philosophy, but certainly the philosophical topics we discussed made me understand how things work in the human mind,” “Philosophy gave me explanations about how the positive techniques work; without Philosophy I think that these techniques would work mechanically like gymnastics, like the habits we have, without knowing why we have them, what exactly they do,” “I’ve learned Philosophy in practice, experientially, and not theoretically,” “I think the connection of Philosophy and Psychology was useful, we didn’t just memorize some philosophical theories, but we tried to put into practice with the positive exercises the philosophy of happiness,” “I can’t tell what helped me more, Philosophy or Positive Psychology, because Hellenistic Philosophy we were taught and Positive Psychology have the same goal, the human happiness,” “with positive exercises only, I don’t know if I would understand what is the meaning of life or what are my basic needs or what are the important things in my life and what are the unimportant ones [...]. I appreciated the value of Philosophy more,” “I liked that we had many discussions about the meaning of happiness, the meaning of life, humanism, kindness, friendship. They are philosophical issues, but also issues of Psychology and this impressed me,” “I realized that Psychology is also based on Philosophy, they are not two different boxes, and if someone explains to you philosophically why you should do each positive technique, this is even more helpful, because it helps you manage better situations very painful for us and for others,” “the Philosophy we were taught has a scientific basis and I liked that, Positive Psychology is also based on Science; we can be and feel well, if what we learn and we apply have to do with human nature, as Science investigates it. I agree with Epicurus, it is not possible to get rid of our fears, if we don’t know our nature, it is not possible to be happy and enjoy our life without scientific knowledge. That’s why it was useful the connection of Philosophy with Psychology.”

Regarding the ways in which the students could use the knowledge, techniques and skills they had acquired to deal with both the pandemic crisis and any emerging difficulties, making a positive change in their lives, the responses

revealed a wide range of approaches, which highlights the deep cognitive impact of the Positive Intervention Program. Realizing the real basic needs and most important things in life, limiting desires, enjoying every moment of the existence and not only the pleasure that comes from achieving goals, facing situations in their true dimensions, mental preparing for changes, adapting to them and treating them as opportunities, realizing that everything is natural and expected in life, realizing the self-worth of human existence and the value of personal control over things, always focusing on the positive side and the benefits of difficulties and not focusing exclusively on losses, and in general the realization that happiness is a matter of personal choice and therefore accessible and attainable, all these highlight the profound positive effect of the Program and the achievement of the goal of cognitive reconstruction. Here is a typical response from a student, in order to accurately convey the range of her thinking:

Through the Program I understood that our desires lead us to anxiety, to stress, to bad mood, to disappointment. We want things, we set goals and we keep trying to achieve them, and when we achieve one goal, we move on to the next and this effort never ends. And if we don't get our goals, we get upset. And we have stress and pressure and all these emotions. But our happiness is not only our goals. They are all the little pleasures of every moment and we should give importance to them. Personally, for so many years I've been studying and preparing continuously to enter the university, considering that only then I would be happy. Unfortunately, now I feel that I have lost a very large part of my life, many happy moments, many small daily pleasures. And I have decided from now on to enjoy every moment just because I exist, and not just to set goals.

However, among the responses was the admission of some students that although they had learned and understood what they needed to do to manage problems and difficulties, as well as the accompanying negative emotions, anxiety and stress, they nevertheless felt that is not always easy, but requires constant effort:

It is not always easy to put into practice what I have learned, because every day I face difficulties, like all of us. I may think rationally, saying to myself e.g. 'nothing terrible will happen,' and that makes me feel good, but not for long. Then again I feel the same and I have to think again about what I have learned. The knowledge doesn't function automatically.

## VIII. Discussion

The key findings of the present study are the significant benefits for mental well-being of all students participating in a Positive Intervention School Program implemented during the period of COVID-19, which combined Positive Psychology and Philosophy. The Intervention had a positive effect in the way of thinking and in the emotional state of the majority of participating female students, enhancing their happiness. Consequently, it affected their quality of life, improving their subjective health, increasing interest in school and learning, making commitment to academic goals, improving interpersonal relationships. These changes confirm the basic principles of both Positive Psychology and Cognitive Psychotherapy as well as of Epicurean and Stoic Philosophy, which advocate that the modification of the way of thinking changes both emotions and behavior.<sup>58</sup> The positive differentiation of the way of thinking is due to the impressive results of the cognitive reconstruction that was achieved in three months, despite the fact that some answers showed difficulties in mental control and in the rationale processing of emotions.

The positive effects on mental well-being of the exercises “Letter of Gratitude,” “Letter from the Future,” “The Best Possible Self / The Best Future Self,” “Three Good Things,” “Gratitude Diary,” “Positive Past Moments,” “Acts of Kindness” confirm the findings of corresponding studies in adolescents and adults.<sup>59</sup> Also, the findings regarding the positive effect

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<sup>58</sup> DiGiuseppe, et al.; Yapijakis, “Ethical Teachings of Epicurus,” 83-88.

<sup>59</sup> Laura A. King, “The Health Benefits of Writing about Life Goals,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 27, no. 7 (2001): 798-807; Emmons, and McCullough, 377; Kristin, S. Layous, et al., “Kindness Counts: Prompting Prosocial Behavior in Preadolescents Boosts Peer Acceptance and Well-being,” *PLOS One* 7, no. 12 (2012): e51380; Keiko Otake, et al., “Happy People Become Happier through Kindness: A Counting Kindness Intervention,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 7 (2006): 361-375; Kennon M. Sheldon, and Sonja Lyubomirsky, “How to Increase and Sustain Positive Emotion: The Effects of Expressing Gratitude and Visualizing Best Possible Selves,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 1, no. 2 (2006): 73-82; Chad M. Burton, and Laura A. King, “Effects of (very) Brief Writing on Health: The Two Minute Miracle,” *British Journal of Health Psychology* 13, no. 1 (2008): 9-14; Jeffrey J. Froh, et al., “Who Benefits the Most from a Gratitude Intervention in Children and Adolescents? Examining Positive Affect as a Moderator,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 4, no. 5 (2009): 408-422; Julieta Galante, et al., “Effect of Kindness-based Meditation on Health and Well-being: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 82, no. 6 (2014): 1101; Sarah D. Pressman, et al., “It’s Good to Do Good and Receive Good: The Impact of a ‘Pay it Forward’ Style Kindness Intervention on Giver and Receiver Well-being,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 10, no. 4 (2015): 293-302; Nezelek, et al., 323-332; Brenda H. O’Connell, et al., “Feeling Thanks and Saying Thanks: A Randomized Controlled Trial Examining if and how Socially Oriented Gratitude Journals Work,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 73, no. 10 (2017): 1280-1300; Algoe, 183-188; Jiang, e36-e45; Yuta Chishima, et al., “Temporal Distancing during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Letter Writing with Future Self Can Mitigate Negative Affect,” *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being* 13, no. 2 (2021): 406-418.

of the “Mental Abstraction Exercise” correspond to those of Koo et al.<sup>60</sup> The results of exercise “One Door Closes, Another Door Opens” confirmed corresponding findings.<sup>61</sup>

One of the key findings of the study was the highlighting of the necessity and effectiveness of the philosophical framing of the applied Positive Intervention. The highlighting of the reinforcing role of Hellenistic Philosophy in the effectiveness of the applied techniques of Positive Psychology, or, in other words, the practical and experiential application of philosophical principles through the applied techniques of Positive Psychology, is a novel finding in the existing literature. The references of the students to the knowledge and skills they acquired to deal with the pandemic crisis and any emerging difficulty, highlight the profound cognitive effect of the Positive Intervention Program, through the successful combination of Philosophy and Positive Psychology.

All female students referred with emphasis as the most positively influencing in dealing with stress and pressure mainly the Epicurean *tetrapharmakos* and the Epicurean principles generally, avoiding negative thoughts of fear of death and obtaining peace of mind in the midst of the pandemic. The students’ referral to personal freedom and choice as the basic condition of personal happiness, the deep understanding of the concept of happiness and how to achieve it enjoying every moment and focusing on the really important and essential things in life, the understanding of the real human needs and the distinction of them, the realization of the individual’s ability to shape his environment and not be negatively affected by it, echo Epicurean thoughts and mainly the Epicurean prudence (practical wisdom).

In general, all the answers about limiting desires, enjoying existence itself and every moment, facing situations in their true dimensions, mentally preparing for changes, adapting to them and seeing them as opportunities, understanding that everything in life and universe is natural and expected, always focusing on the positives and benefits of difficulties and not exclusively on losses, and generally realizing that happiness is a matter of personal choice and, for this reason, accessible and feasible, all these thoughts echo principles mainly of Epicurean Philosophy but also of Stoicism. At the same time, they highlight the achievement of a deep cognitive reconstruction and the

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<sup>60</sup> Minkyung Koo, et al., “It’s a Wonderful Life: Mentally Subtracting Positive Events Improves People’s Affective States, Contrary to Their Affective Forecasts,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, no. 5 (2008): 1217.

<sup>61</sup> Tayyab Rashid, and Afroze Anjum, “Positive Psychotherapy for Young Adults and Children,” in *Handbook of Depression in Children and Adolescents*, eds. John R. Z. Abela, and Benjamin L. Hankin, 250-287 (New York: Guilford Press, 2008); Fabian Gander, et al., “Strength-based Positive Interventions: Further Evidence for their Potential in Enhancing Well-being and Alleviating Depression,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 14, no. 4 (2013): 1241-1259.

profound positive and cognitive effect of the Positive Intervention Program.

A key difficulty in the study was the online implementation of the Positive Intervention Program due to COVID-19. The pandemic did not allow the implementation of the Intervention in an entire school class. In addition, a qualitative methodology was used with all the associated limitations and potential biases that accompany qualitative studies.<sup>62</sup> The Intervention was based on a small sample of convenience, without a control group. For this reason it is difficult to establish any causal relationship between the Intervention and the extracted outcomes/results.<sup>63</sup> An additional limitation due to the conditions of the pandemic and the use of the qualitative method is the absence of measurements with weighted and validated psychometric tools and scales, as well as the absence of consistent criteria for determining the dimensions of well-being, which would provide greater objectivity in the evaluation of Intervention and would further strengthen the extracted results.

Potential biases in the study were addressed by cross-checking the data through triangulation by the use of two data collection tools, the individual interview and the focus group interview, which contributed to more secure results. The intentional overlapping of the questions of the interview guide contributed to checking the consistency of the students' answers and, consequently, to increasing their reliability.<sup>64</sup> It should be mentioned that the qualitative methodology, as an interpretive process, with subjectivity in the planning, recording and analysis of the data, and the limited sample with its specific characteristics, could not lead to the derivation of representative conclusions nor provide the possibility of their generalization for the entire population of Lyceum students. Moreover, an intervention program that may be highly beneficial for one group of children or adolescents may present disadvantages and inefficiencies for another group with some other characteristics.<sup>65</sup>

Due to the methodological limitations already been mentioned, a necessity arises for the validation of the findings and their possible transferability to other similar school environments, as well as their generalization, in the sense of the possibility of their utilization for the development of a broader theory. Future research should be implemented with multiple qualitative and quantitative methods, in different school environments, with expanded samples and with control groups, with weighted psychometric tools and multi-item scales to control more variables, which may affect the effectiveness

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<sup>62</sup> Creswell.

<sup>63</sup> Fenwick-Smith, et al., 1-17.

<sup>64</sup> Robson.

<sup>65</sup> Fenwick-Smith, et al., 1-17.

of the intervention, in order to strengthen the validity, generalizability and transferability of the data of the present study. Among the new research needs that arise is the measurement of the degree of effect on the mental well-being of adolescents of each technique of Positive Psychology applied, on the one hand, and the degree of effect of Philosophy and the philosophical framing of the positive intervention, on the other hand, which were difficult to assess separately in present work, in order to highlight their effectiveness in a measurable and distinct way.

In conclusion, the Positive Intervention School Program implemented during the period of COVID-19, which combined Positive Psychology and Philosophy, had significant benefits for mental well-being. The Intervention had a remarkably positive effect in the way of thinking and in the emotional state of all participating female students, enhancing their happiness and improving aspects of the quality of life.

Despite some methodological limitations, the present study has produced important research data, which highlighted the positive effect of the philosophical interventions on the mental well-being of adolescents. The study showed the necessity and effectiveness of the philosophical framing of the applied Positive Intervention. It showed the reinforcing role of Hellenistic Philosophy, especially Epicurean but also Stoic, in the effectiveness of the applied Positive Psychology. The references of the students highlight the profound cognitive effect of the Positive Intervention Program, through the successful combination of Philosophy and Positive Psychology.

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Table 1. Structure of the Positive Intervention in the weekly meetings

Weeks	Content of program "Living Happily in the Era of COVID-19"
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consolidation of a positive climate of trust and cooperation</li> <li>• Projection video <i>Your Secret</i> by Jean Sebastien-Monzani (<a href="https://vimeo.com/12890334">https://vimeo.com/12890334</a>)</li> <li>• Record and present 3 goals of each student</li> <li>• Discussion on the concept of <i>happiness-bliss</i> (eudaimonia) based on the personal beliefs and experiences of the female students</li> <li>• Homework: write down <i>Three Positive Events</i> at the end of each day for the entire next week</li> </ul>

2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion of the concept of <i>happiness-bliss</i> (eudaimonia), according to the Epicurean philosophical approach, sharing relevant passages from texts of Epicurean philosophers</li> <li>• Discussion of <i>savoring techniques</i></li> <li>• Examining activities to increase positive emotions as well as ways to enjoy past, present, and future experiences</li> <li>• Homework: daily practice of the students in their own <i>savoring techniques</i></li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on the concept of <i>gratitude</i> and the positive feelings that come from it</li> <li>• Homework: (a) creating and keeping a weekly <i>Gratitude Diary</i>, (b) exercise-positive technique: <i>One Door Closes, another Door Opens</i></li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion of the meaning and purpose of life – <i>Meaningful Dialogue about Meaning</i></li> <li>• Reading excerpt on <i>The Meaning of Life</i> from Irvin Yalom’s “Religion and Psychiatry” (2002)</li> <li>• Record positions and approaches</li> <li>• Search the internet for related texts</li> <li>• Homework: write about <i>Your Best Possible Self</i> or alternatively <i>Your Best Future Self</i></li> </ul>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion of the meaning and purpose of life according to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophical approach</li> <li>• Sharing relevant quotes about <i>meaning</i> and <i>purpose</i> of life from writings of Epicureans and Stoic philosophers and focus group discussion</li> <li>• Presentation and implementation of the <i>Smart Goals</i> technique</li> <li>• Homework: complete the individual <i>Smart Goals</i></li> </ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on <i>positive relationships through expressing gratitude</i></li> <li>• Exploring ways to have more positive social interactions</li> <li>• Homework exercises: (a) <i>Letter of Gratitude</i>, (b) choosing and sharing with relatives applied positivity exercises</li> </ul>
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focusing on the concepts of <i>kindness, friendship, humanitarianism</i> and <i>altruism</i> in the light of Epicurean philosophy and the Utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stewart Mill</li> <li>• Link to recent findings of modern scientific research</li> <li>• Homework: <i>Acts of Kindness</i></li> </ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narratives of intense positive experiences – <i>happy moments in the past</i> and focusing on the emotions experienced and the thoughts that accompanied them</li> <li>• Homework: write a <i>Letter from the future</i></li> </ul>
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program recap</li> <li>• More extensive exploration of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophical systems as timeless but also topical “answers” to many philosophical and existential questions, but also to specific concerns of female students in the midst of the pandemic</li> <li>• Creation of personal plans for the prevention of “relapse” in the former psychological state</li> <li>• Homework: redefining future goals</li> </ul>
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation and discussion of the students’ personal plans and goals</li> <li>• Homework Review: <i>Your Best Future Self</i></li> </ul>
11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparison of the contents of the exercise <i>The Best Future Self</i> of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> sessions to identify similarities and differences, and discuss them</li> <li>• Evaluation of the intervention for the degree of fulfillment of the three objectives of the female students of the 1<sup>st</sup> session</li> <li>• Production of written texts by female students about their emotions, their physical health, their school performance, their social life, the ways-techniques of managing the health crisis and social isolation</li> <li>• Planning to re-conduct individual oral interviews</li> <li>• Completion of Intervention</li> </ul>



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