

Resilience and Recovery: Analysing Davis in *Brave Enough* through the PERMA Model of Positive Psychology

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Abstract

*Young adult fiction is aimed primarily at readers between the ages of twelve and eighteen. It often centres on themes that are highly relatable to teenagers. Illness narratives in young adult fiction explore themes of personal struggle, resilience, and recovery. These narratives can mirror real-life processes of healing and personal development. The character's recovery can be depicted as a process of growth rather than just a struggle. This research paper applies Seligman's well-being theory, particularly the PERMA model of positive psychology, to analyse the character Davis in *Brave Enough* by Kati Gardner. The PERMA model emphasises five core elements, including positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. This paper explores how the portrayal of Davis' journey from addiction to recovery reflects positive transformation through these five elements. This paper aims to show how positive psychology can offer deeper insight into character development in young adult fiction, particularly while overcoming adversity.*

Keywords: Young adult fiction, resilience, recovery, well-being, positive psychology.

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Popular culture in literature refers to the body of works that resonate with a larger group of people. Popular culture encompasses genres such as fantasy, science fiction, music, horror, television shows, video games, etc. Writers of popular fiction often write with the masses' interest in mind. They concentrate on themes and issues that resonate with a broad audience, particularly younger readers, who often influence trends in popular culture. "The transitoriness of much popular culture is linked to its generationalism: massified popular culture is directed, in particular, to the young, since they have the greatest discretionary spending power, as well as the most need to use it to make social connections" (Mambrol). Works that emerge from this cultural setting often reflect the struggles, values and dreams of teenagers. Their lives are often depicted through various forms of media, such as music, film, books, etc. Among these, fiction plays a vital role in portraying their emotions, challenges and growth.

Young adult fiction targets readers between the ages of twelve and eighteen but is also enjoyed by adults. Young adult fiction addresses themes such as identity formation, romance, relationships, adventure, illness, mental health, and drugs. They provide relatable content for young adults. Through these narratives, young adults can connect with characters and experiences that mirror their challenges. Moreover, as literature continues to develop, its role in supporting positive psychological outcomes remains important. A recent study by Gokmen Arslan et al. states that story reading can lead to improvements in mindfulness, optimism, happiness, and overall positive emotions while reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression among young adults (790). This suggests that reading books that represent the principles of positive psychology can serve as a therapeutic tool for young adult readers.

Psychologist Martin Seligman coined the term 'positive psychology' in 1998 when he was the president of the American Psychological Association. He aims for positive psychology to broaden the field of psychology beyond just focusing on illnesses and encourage the study of healthy human behaviour (Baumgardner et al. 4). This perspective encourages individuals to attain their fullest potential rather than merely coping with challenges. This shift is important because Positive psychology uses scientific methods to address the complex challenges of human behaviour, without relying on unrealistic hopes or false beliefs (Seligman, "Positive Psychology" 4). This research paper applies Seligman's well-being theory, particularly through the PERMA model of positive psychology, to analyse the character Davis in *Brave Enough* by Kati Gardner. This paper aims to show how the portrayal of Davis' life and recovery can be seen not only as a struggle but also as a positive transformation as a young adult.

Brave Enough (2018) by Kati Gardner is a young adult cancer fiction that focuses on two main characters, Cason and Davis. Davis Channing plays a pivotal role as a cancer survivor and a recovering drug addict. He is a complex character who is both resilient and vulnerable. He is introduced in a court trial for intending to distribute controlled substances. Due to his medical history and clean record, he is

released. However, he is compelled to complete three hundred hours of community service in the oncology unit of the children's hospital where he has been treated. Throughout the story, he struggles to maintain his sobriety but is determined to regain control over his life. During his service, he meets Cason, a talented ballerina who is diagnosed with Ewing's Sarcoma. Their relationship develops as they support each other in facing their individual battles. His inner conflicts are highlighted as the narrative unfolds. He feels guilty when he meets his ex-girlfriend, Alexis, who is engrossed in drugs because of him. He gets terrified when he meets his old friend Ethan, who once supplied him with drugs. Ethan even threatens and assaults him. Whenever he meets them, he is tempted to use drugs. However, the connection he has with his mother, Cason, friends and health professionals stops him. Their relationships play a significant role in the process of his recovery. His story shows that despite struggles, support from loved ones and others can provide strength to overcome challenges.

There is a lack of scholarly research articles on *Brave Enough* by Kati Gardner. However, various book reviews and blogs provide insights into the text. The review, "Brave Enough by Kati Gardner", by Sonali Dabade discusses the emotional impact of the text, which offers both reality and hope in the portrayal of cancer experiences.

"Review: Brave Enough by Kati Gardner" by Inautopiastateofmind, analyses the themes of friendship, recovery, and grief in the story. The review highlights the characters' individual ways of struggling with cancer and the emotional depth of their journeys. Research Papers, "Application of the PERMA Model of Well-being in Undergraduate Students" by Melissa K. Kovich et al. and "A multidimensional approach to measuring well-being in students: Application of the PERMA framework" by Margaret L. Kern et al., state that the PERMA model helps to understand and improve well-being in teenage students by focusing on key elements like positive emotions, relationships, and accomplishments. These studies suggest providing the PERMA model's approach as a framework for schools to enhance teenage students' well-being.

There is a notable absence of research papers that apply positive psychology to young adult cancer fiction. Positive psychology, particularly Seligman's PERMA model, provides a framework to explore the gap of how young adult cancer fiction can promote optimism, personal growth and resilience. This research paper focuses on Davis' experiences relating to positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement. By doing so, this paper seeks to fill in the gap in literary studies by exploring how positive psychology can shed light on character development within young adult cancer fiction. This research paper hypothesises that *Brave Enough* contributes to a resilient and hopeful portrayal of addiction and recovery by emphasising personal well-being and positive transformation through the experiences of the character Davis.

Seligman's well-being theory is used for analysis. Martin. E.P. Seligman is an American psychologist. He has introduced the well-being theory in his book *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*. Seligman considers well-being a construct that is made up of different measurable elements, each contributing to overall well-being. Well-being is not defined by just one measure but by several factors that contribute to it. Each factor represents a different aspect of well-being and not just personal feelings. "So the construct of well-being, not the entity of life satisfaction, is the focal topic of positive psychology" (Seligman, "What is Well-being?" 15). Therefore, it highlights the aspects that bring meaning to life.

Central to this theory is the PERMA model. This model is identified by five core elements that contribute to well-being. They are positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment. The first element is positive emotion. This segment focuses on experiencing joy, gratitude, hope and other positive feelings. These positive emotions are crucial for overall well-being, as they enhance happiness and life satisfaction. The second is engagement, which refers to being deeply involved in activities. This state is often associated with personal fulfilment. Third is positive relationships. Relationships are significant for emotional support and overall happiness. This element highlights the importance of feeling loved, valued and connected. The fourth element is meaning. This factor involves having a sense of purpose and being a part of something bigger than oneself. The fifth element is accomplishment, which focuses on achieving goals and experiencing success. This aspect increases self-esteem and confidence in life. This paper uses each element of the PERMA model to analyse Davis' experience with overcoming addiction and staying sober. It depicts his journey as a process of personal transformation, psychological growth and well-being.

Positive emotions are key components of the PERMA model and are crucial for well-being. Throughout the narrative, Davis experiences moments of joy and gratitude. When he spends time with Cason, he feels happy. His interaction with health professionals and his mother instills a sense of gratitude. Initially, he struggles with feelings of hopelessness, guilt, and shame for letting his loved ones down by becoming an addict after surviving cancer. It is obvious when he is asked to do his community service at the oncology unit where he is treated. His discomfort and guilt are evident as Gardner writes, "He did not feel relieved... He was going back to the clinic... And see his doctor and his nurses, people he respected. People who loved him. People he had let down" (17). However, as the story progresses, he begins to experience moments of hope. He starts to believe that he has a future beyond his addiction. He feels grateful for having his mother, Cason, health professionals and his friends in his process of recovery. They help him discover his purpose when he has lost hope in himself. These positive emotions play a significant role in coping with his past and present struggles.

The second element, engagement, refers to being deeply absorbed in any work. Davis' engagement with recovery is a crucial part of his journey. His engagement with his volunteer work in childcare and his dedication to staying sober, as well as his participation in the cancer camp, show his commitment to his healing. While helping Cason and others in the cancer unit, he realised the value of life. This realisation helps him stay controlled and allows him to remain grounded whenever he feels the urge to get high on drugs. Though there are instances which remind him of his past as an addict, his involvement in cancer care helps him stay focused. This awareness is evident when he says, "I can go back to Camp Chemo if I'm clean" (Gardner 27). This involvement not only provides him with a sense of purpose but also allows him to immerse himself in meaningful activities that contribute positively to his well-being. His involvement in the recovery group meetings allows him to be deeply focused as he listens to his fellow members' stories. It serves as a reminder that he is not embarking on this journey alone. His engagement provides him with the necessary focus and determination to maintain his recovery path.

Positive relationships are an integral part of well-being in the PERMA model. It provides emotional support, love, and connections. The relationships Davis has with Cason, Doctor Henderson, his mother, friends and Heather play a significant role in his emotional and psychological growth. These relationships provide him the empathy and connection to rebuild his sense of self-worth. They help him see that he is not defined completely by his past mistakes. The bond he has with Cason is central to his character development. Their relationship helps both characters to navigate their individual challenges. The strong connection he has with his friends, loved ones, and health professionals enhances his emotional resilience. Amidst his struggle to stay sober, Davis cares about Cason and does his best to make her comfortable and relaxed in the hospital. Their connection allows them to support one another through their struggles.

The quest for meaning is central to Davis' journey. His search for meaning provides him a sense of purpose. Finding meaning beyond his addiction is important to his recovery. By helping others, Davis starts to see himself beyond just a sober person. He is no longer defined solely by his addiction but by his ability to contribute to the recovery of others in the cancer unit. This attribute plays a major role in his recovery and emotional resilience. He has been filled with guilt for dragging his ex-girlfriend Alexis into drugs. Now that he stays sober and Alexis dies due to her addiction, his sense of guilt is aggravated. He continues to blame himself for her death. However, when Cason's mother, Natali, approaches him and thanks him for being nice to Cason, he realises that he can contribute positively to someone's life. A tiny spark of hope ignites within him, and this helps him to attain a new sense of purpose. This feeling helps him to face the guilt and move forward.

The final stage is accomplishment. Davis' personal achievement lies in his journey to sobriety. It gives him a sense of control over his life and helps him realise his self-worth. The hardships he encounters during recovery help him gain confidence. Throughout the story, he achieves his milestones by staying sober and

supporting others. These accomplishments not only contribute to his well-being but also serve as proof of his resilience and growth. One significant moment of accomplishment occurs when Margaret, the Camp Chemo director, informs Davis that he will have the honour of lighting the first campfire. She acknowledges his progress, telling him that the camp is proud of him and that he is a fighter. This recognition helps him realise that his past struggles have shaped him into someone who is capable of inspiring and supporting others. Uttering the words “Be brave this year, camp. Be fearless” (Gardner 272) to the campers, he fully embraces his journey and the strength he has gained through his struggles.

He not only acknowledges his strength but also inspires others to face their battles with courage. This also reinforces his transformation from a patient at Camp Chemo to a source of inspiration for others facing similar struggles. Additionally, receiving a chip for being sober for a year further affirms his progress. Victories like this accumulate into a larger sense of accomplishment for Davis. This instance shows that Davis’ journey is not just about overcoming addiction but also about embracing his role as a survivor. His past, which has been full of shame and regret, now becomes a testament to his resilience.

This text offers more than entertainment to young readers by encouraging emotional development and well-being. By focusing on the five elements, this study shows that young adult cancer fiction can not only depict the hardships of illness and recovery but also offer hope, optimism and well-being. By experiencing all five elements of positive psychology, Davis illustrates that one can overcome adversity by nurturing well-being. This makes this text a powerful narrative of personal transformation.

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