

Obituaries

Christopher Peterson “Other People Matter”



Christopher Peterson (1950–2012)

Christopher M. Peterson, a distinguished psychologist, great educator and wonderful person died suddenly on 9 October 2012 from sudden heart failure. He was 62. He was Professor of Psychology and Organizational Studies, Director of Michigan Positive Psychology Center at the University of Michigan. He was one of the founders of positive psychology, the scientific study of what makes life worth living. He studied, taught, and lived positive psychology. He had a great mind and a giant heart. He had a brilliance accompanied by love, generosity, a great sense of humor, humility, fairness, integrity, and genuineness. Simply put, he was a “Gentle Giant”. His premature death was not only a personal tragedy for those who loved him, but also a huge loss to the field of positive psychology. He has left giant footprints in the field of

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psychology and the lives of so many people he touched through his research, teaching, mentorship, and interactions.

Chris was a productive researcher. He was named among the world's 100 most widely cited psychologists and psychiatrists over the past 20 years by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI). He was the author of more than 350 scholarly publications and 15 books including *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004), *A Primer in Positive Psychology* (2006), and *Pursuing the Good Life: 100 Reflections on Positive Psychology* (2012). He was one of the most sought-after speakers in psychology worldwide. His many scholarly contributions include (1) the creation of a classification of character strengths and virtues, and reliable and valid strategies for assessing them, which is considered groundbreaking in the field of positive psychology, (2) the development of the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ) and the Content Analysis of Verbatim Explanations (CAVE) technique to assess an individual's explanatory style of negative life events, and (3) the Global Assessment Tool (GAT) that measures psychological fitness of soldiers as part of the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program (CSF) in the US Army. These measures are among the most popular psychological tests in the world today. He was also one of the pioneers in documenting empirical evidence of the link between optimism and physical health. He found that optimism predicts not only physical health, but also longevity. His work has had an impact on research and practice in various settings including health care, education, military, business, and politics all over the world.

One of Chris's favorite sayings was, "Other people matter. Period". He stated that the entire field of positive psychology could be summarised with this simple statement. He argued that positive relationships were essential to a healthy, happy, and meaningful life. His life was an embodiment of this saying. Chris was a people person. He loved people. He loved getting to know them. He came to school every day and always left his office door open. He welcomed everyone who walked by and sometimes even invited them into his office. He also tended to invite himself into the offices of others whose doors were open. Chris made everyone he interacted with feel as though they mattered. He was genuinely interested in getting to know others. He always asked about them and listened to them. He made everyone around him feel comfortable and respected. Despite his achievements, he was an understated, humble, and generous person. He was so generous with his time and resources for his students and colleagues. He always found joy in letting other people shine and shared the credit with others. He had a special gift for seeing the best in each of us.

Chris was an outstanding teacher. He loved teaching. He was the recipient of the prestigious 2010 Golden Apple Award for outstanding university teaching, voted on by students. He was also an Arthur F. Thurnau Professor at the University of Michigan, a prestigious title given to tenured faculty

members who excel at undergraduate education. Among the many honors and awards throughout his career, he cherished these two the most. He had a gift for transferring knowledge to students in an interesting and engaging way. He was a great teacher not because he was perfect, but because he never stopped trying to be a better one. He treated each student as a person and genuinely cared about them. When students visited his office, he not only helped them with their questions but he also asked them whether they ate and slept OK. He was also the kind of person who got more excited than you did when good things happened to you. It was no accident that his nickname was “Mother Theresa”. He inspired so many young minds to develop a love of learning and a desire to be better people.

I had the privilege to have Chris as my mentor, collaborator, and best friend for over 10 years. He challenged me to ask research questions that matter, to think deeply about the consequences of my work, and to do the right thing. He taught me to stop and notice things. He taught me to show interest in others and to listen to them. Most of all, he taught me to have fun at whatever I did. He was always supportive and excited about my ideas and encouraged me to pursue them. I am indebted to him for making me a better researcher, teacher, and person. I will miss the early morning phone calls, that excited voice telling me about new findings that he worked on all night. I will miss that twinkle in his eyes when he talked about new ideas. I will miss that warm smile and his big hugs.

Other people matter. Chris matters, too.

Chris was truly one of a kind. His memory is a blessing.

Nansook Park
University of Michigan

Over the years, the psychology team at Wiley has had the pleasure of working with Chris Peterson on a number of different and varied projects. We were saddened to hear of his death in October 2012.

Chris was always willing to take a risk on new ventures.

With joint Editor, Ralf Schwarzer, and working with Ray Fowler, the Past President of the IAAP, Chris launched this journal *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being* back in 2008. The first issue was published in *Applied Psychology: An International Review* and was filled with the leading scholars in the field with contributions from Seligman, Park, Sweeney, Diener, Kesebir, and Lucas to name only a few. You can read the first issue for free, including the editorial from Ralf and Chris here: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/apps.2008.57.issue-s1/issuetoc>

Chris was keynote speaker at one of Wiley’s first Online Conferences in 2010, the subject of which was Well-Being. Within 24 hours of the first invites

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going out, over 1,000 delegates had registered. In total, over 5,000 delegates of all levels and from over 70 countries registered to hear the talks and be involved in the seminars. Chris was a really good communicator and his enthusiasm for positive psychology came across in everything he did.

In September 2012, Chris advised and endorsed Wiley on TED studies (www.wiley.com/go/tedstudies). This is an exciting new venture that will feature 21 collections of curated talks, organised into popular academic subject areas along with commissioned instructor materials to accompany TED's offering to educators. The first TED studies learning materials focused on Understanding Happiness and were released in November 2012, sadly after Chris' death. You can see the talk and read Chris' endorsement here <http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-814228.html>

Chris was always willing to embrace new opportunities. We were privileged to have worked with him.

Sarah Oates, *Publisher, Wiley*

I am very sad to have lost my esteemed colleague with whom I have edited the present journal since its inauguration in 2009. Christopher Peterson (18 February 1950—9 October 2012), Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, was one of the founders of Positive Psychology. He was among the 100 most widely cited psychologists in the world. He is noted for his work on optimism, health, character strength, happiness, and well-being.

By nominating him as an editor, the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) had joined forces with the owner of this journal, the International Association of Applied Psychology (IAAP). Our aim was to meet the needs of the members of these associations as well as the larger community of psychologists interested in how to promote health and optimal functioning. My collaboration with Chris has been efficient and pleasant. I remember him for his unique ability to communicate with authors and reviewers in a very supportive and polite manner. His advice was very much appreciated and it was an honor to work with him.

His death is a profound loss to the journal, and he will be sorely missed.

Ralf Schwarzer, Editor, *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*