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# Resilient Communities in Belgium: The role of Positive Health in strengthening local well-being in communities

KAROLIEN VAN DEN BREKEL-DIJKSTRA

## Introduction

Resilient communities are those that can adapt to challenges and maintain well-being despite adversity. The approach of caring communities in Belgium, (1) have been established over the last years to support the movement towards more integrated care in communities. The concept of Positive Health is gaining traction as a foundation for building such communities. By focusing on people's strengths and resources rather than merely addressing disease, Positive Health fosters a holistic approach to healthcare and social support. This article explores how Positive Health is being implemented in Belgium to enhance resilience at both individual and community levels.

## The Role of Positive Health in Belgium

Positive Health, developed in the Netherlands by Machteld Huber, views health as the ability to adapt and self-manage in response to life's challenges. The model encompasses six dimensions: bodily functions, mental well-being, meaning and purpose, quality of life, participation, and daily functioning. (2,3) In Belgium, healthcare professionals and community leaders have begun integrating Positive Health into their practices to empower individuals towards healthier and meaningful steps and create more sustainable health systems.(4-6)

## The Model of Positive Health as one of the interventions of Goal-Oriented Care

Goal-oriented care aligns with the Positive Health model. It highlights that goal-oriented care provides appropriate treatment

based on the (life) goals of the patient. (5) Positive Health offers a broad perspective on health, encompassing the above mentioned six dimensions of health. With the 'alternative dialogue' in the primary care consultations patients become more aware of what is important, what their (health) goals are and which steps they can take. A qualitative research project among primary care providers in Flanders, Belgium has been recently undertaken. De Laet et al reported about the experiences with the integration of the Positive Health model into goal-oriented care practices and communities. (5) The article examines the practical implementation of the Positive Health concept, developed by Machteld Huber, which is known in many primary care practices in the Netherlands. About 2000 general practitioners in the Netherlands had training in Positive Health, stimulated by the project 'more time per patient' from the Dutch GP Association. (14) It discusses how the average Dutch general practice differs from those in Flanders, noting aspects like the gatekeeper role of Dutch GPs and the extensive use of practice nurses. The article in HuisartsNu provides insights into how Positive Health can be applied in different healthcare settings, emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach to patient care. In most of the interviews the care providers agreed upon the importance of a shared vision to stimulate good interprofessional collaboration in integrated care. Co-creation between the social and medical domain from different disciplines supports towards common visions in regions and networks (4-7) Unless the differences in health systems, the implementation of the concept is very universal. The difficulties with the mindset change from disease oriented towards more health and resilience focussed care is similar in many countries.

### Initiatives towards resilient communities.

Several projects in Belgium illustrate the impact of Positive Health on local communities:

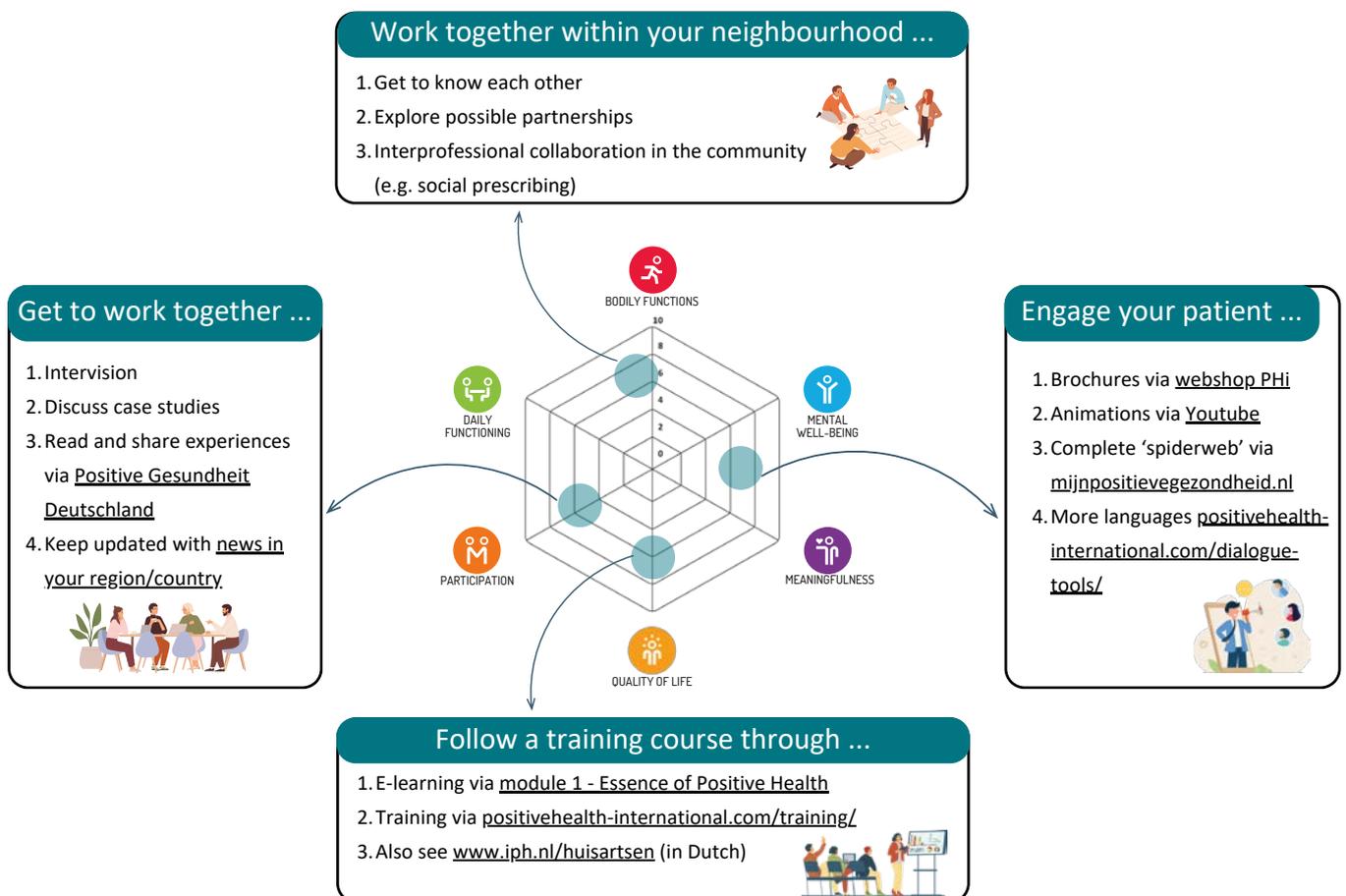
- ◆ **General Practitioner Networks:** Groups of GPs in cities like Leuven, Wilsele and Antwerp are using Positive Health principles to shift from a disease-centred approach to a person-centred approach. This includes extended consultations in their practices that focus on what truly matters to patients. With these early adaptors and ambassadors for Positive Health, these stakeholders were important to co-create in local projects and activities in communities. They also started with a license for the digital tool of Positive Health to get feedback about wishes/needs of the community as the need for specific activities (eg for people with loneliness, people with questions about meaning, sleeping problems, etc.) and organise custom based follow up. (4,6,7)
- ◆ **Community Health Projects:** In regions such as Wilrijk Antwerpen, zorgzaam Wilsele (6-8) and Practice Arzo in Turnhout, local ambassadors of Positive Health have worked together to inspire colleagues to establish integrated care models for resilient communities. With a variety of initiatives medical and social professionals were brought together to co-create health solutions with residents. In Antwerpen there were network

events with the local professionals and residents which generated a positive atmosphere with the ‘what is possible’ mindset, in the café-sante project (9)

- ◆ **Education and Training:** More than 100 healthcare providers, including doctors, nurses, psychologists, and community workers, have been trained in Positive Health methods in 2023. These professionals, in turn, introduce the approach in their respective fields, creating a ripple effect. The national representing organisation for the GP’s in Belgium, Domus Medica, supports the Positive Health movement and created a webpage about the theme Positive Health. (13)

### Challenges and Opportunities

Implementing Positive Health in Belgium comes with both challenges and opportunities. Cultural differences and traditional healthcare structures sometimes create resistance to new models of care. Additionally, collaboration between medical and social sectors is still developing. However, Positive Health has gained momentum through education, community engagement, and policy discussions. There is increasing recognition of the approach’s potential to enhance well-being and reduce healthcare burdens.



## Conclusion

The movement towards resilient communities in Belgium is growing, with Positive Health playing a crucial role in this transformation. By fostering a shift from illness-centred to well-being-centred care, this approach is helping individuals take ownership of their health while strengthening local support networks. As Belgium continues to expand its Positive Health initiatives, the concept offers valuable insights for other countries interested in building resilient communities through holistic and person-centred care.

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## Karolien van den Brekel, M.D. PhD.

Karolien van den Brekel is a general practitioner in Utrecht, the Netherlands, interested in innovation and prevention and applies Positive Health in her practice on a daily basis. With Positive Health she delivers personalized care which gives her a lot of work pleasure. She worked and lived 10 years abroad where she did research, obtained her doctorate in gynaecology and general practice in Utrecht and New York and got experience in general practices in Germany (Munich) and Ireland. She did an international coaching training while living in Japan with her family. The time abroad gave her not only wonderful new life experiences but also resilience and a broad perspective on health.

It is Karolien's ambition to contribute to health transformation international as director of Positive Health international, trainer, educator of Positive Health and author of the Handbook Positive Health in Primary Care, the Dutch example. She has been active in Germany from 2022 to train groups of German colleagues in applying Positive Health in daily practice.



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