

An Inside Look at Positive Psychology

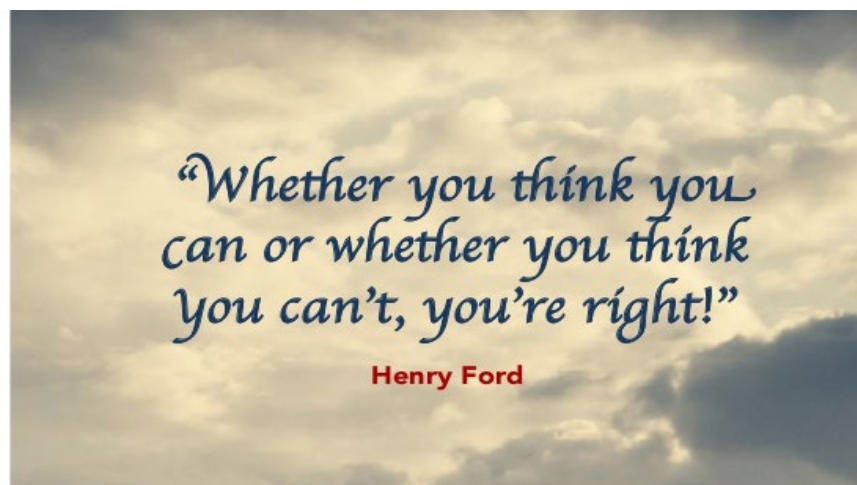
by

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It's been said that psychology, historically, has attempted to understand and help people by focusing on problems and failure. Positive psychology is different; it instead examines how the average person can be happier and lead a more quiet, peaceful and satisfying life. Positive psychology encourages people to identify and develop their own positive emotions, experiences, personal strengths, and habits, and reverse the center of attention from negative to positive. If we can shift attention to the positive areas of our work or family life, such as by thinking about what went right during the day, instead of where I didn't perform perfectly, then we can bring a better balance between the positive and negative, be more effective in our interactions, communications, and relations with others, and develop a more hopeful outlook toward the future.

It is important to state here that positive psychology is more than putting on "rose-colored glasses." It is a process of learning to view, explain, and explain events in a positive frame of mind and to apply this new outlook to our day-to-day interactions. This article, first in a series, will describe some of the approaches and techniques we can use to shift from negative to positive.

Principles of Positive Psychology



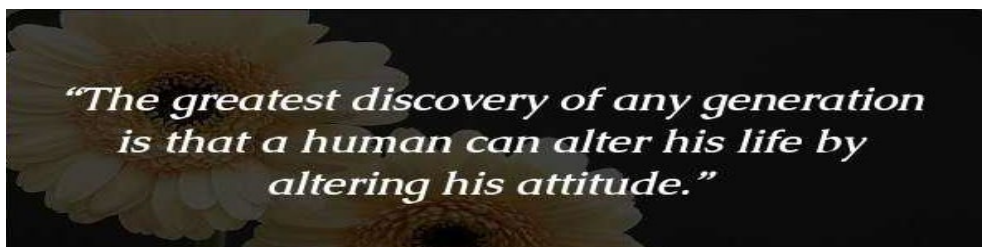
"Whether you think you can or you can't, either way you are right." Henry Ford

This quote from one of the greatest American inventors and manufacturers captures a basic principle of positive psychology: Our thoughts influence so much of who we think we are, what we are capable of, our self-image, and so on, and changing our thoughts, in effect, can change our entire self-image. Here are some essential principles used in Positive Psychology:

1. **We choose how we respond:** It is not possible to always control the events in our lives, but it is possible to control our reactions. We can choose how we want to respond to these circumstances, and we know responding in a positive, encouraging manner is more valuable than a negative reaction. A simple example is our response when someone cuts us off in traffic – this is a good indicator of how we choose to react. Do we personalize that event, “Why is she so reckless and inconsiderate of me!” or do we react with a more measured, reasoned response, “She must be reckless with everyone on the road.”



2. **We can change the focus from negative to positive:** We can control, change, and focus our thoughts away from negative, self-limiting self-talk and toward more positive, self-improving thoughts that improve our self-confidence, personal wellbeing, and happiness. If I used harsh words with a co-worker out of frustration or fit of anger, it does no good to be upset at myself or spend too much time on being a mean person. Instead, I can use my thoughts to understand what caused my reaction and make an effort to communicate in more useful and less emotional ways.
3. **We can find the positive events:** Looking back on the positive experiences of the day is a calming activity, especially as we retire for the evening. If we take the time to recall a few positive events in our day that we experienced or caused, we will experience peace, calmness and confidence as we go off to sleep.
4. **Finding the positive in others:** Positive psychology also means looking for and appreciating the positive qualities which include, appearance, actions, and helpful attitudes - that we notice in others. In this way, we make other people's lives better and we feel better about ourselves in return.
5. **We are today the result of our past thinking, and we shall be what we are thinking today.** Positive psychology uses the Law of Attraction as a major way of thinking: Law of Attraction brings us what we have created with our own thinking; like attracts like. In other words, we are creating and re-creating ourselves all the time.



William James, Father of American Psychology, once said "Our belief at the beginning of an undertaking is the one thing that ensures the successful outcome of your venture – The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind."

EXPLANATORY STYLE – Positive or Negative

Explanatory style refers to how people explain the events of their lives, or how we understand events, or how we can explain a situation. Explanatory style leans toward either feelings of hope (optimism) or negative thinking (pessimism). Positive-thinking people have a positive explanatory style, or a positive way of explaining events in their lives. And negative thinking people on the other hand have the opposite, or a negative explanatory style.

- Positive-thinking people explain positive events as having happened *because* of them. They also see events as an indication that more positive things will happen in the future (a sign that things are stable and unchanging), and in other areas of their lives on a general scale.
- Positive-thinking people maintain a “try again” mindset, which makes them more likely to succeed in the future, and less upset by failure.
- Negative-thinking people tend to blame themselves when things go wrong, and are more reluctant to try again with each negative experience in life. They look at neutral events as negative. They see positive events in their lives as one-off experiences that have nothing to do with them, and expect the worst later on. In this way, positive-thinkers and negative thinkers both create self-satisfying predictions.

In other words, *what you think about, you bring about!*

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about.



Here is a simple exercise to highlight the positive thinker vs. negative thinkers. First, put on the positive thinker's hat, and look around the room you are in right now, and find things that a positive thinker would notice - the comfortable furniture, the useful objects lying around, the room colors, the plants, and so on. Now, change hats and see the same room from a negative thinker's perspective - the clutter, the sounds, the glare or darkness, maybe dirt or dust, marks on the walls, and so on. So, the same room but two different takes on the same space. Which hat are we wearing throughout our day?



REFRAMING EVENTS – Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty?

Have you noticed how two people can face the same situation and one person can describe the situation as a disturbing experience while another sees it as a minor drawback? – The glass is half full or half empty analogy. Or have you had one of those days when it seems that everything is going wrong, until you hear someone else's troubles that make yours look weak in comparison, showing you that your problems really aren't so bad?



In your mind, form a picture of a cardboard box. Get a good picture of it. Now imagine a smaller box, and put it right to the left of the first one. Now, imagine a third box, bigger than the first one, and put it to the right of the first one. They're all cardboard boxes. There's always a bigger one, and always a smaller one. There's always something better or worse, always something hotter or colder, always someone richer or poorer, healthier or sicker. Just like all things, or events, like a phone call, a letter, or a conversation with a family member, or a report from your doctor. Everything is relative. And when you put an event in perspective with others, it's called re-framing. And to take this a step further, nothing is really good or bad – it's only the meaning we attach to it.

Reframing means changing the way you look at something and changing your experience of it. Re-framing can turn a difficult event into a challenge to be bravely overcome, like being restricted to crutches after a bad fall and broken ankle. It can help us to see a negative event as an experience from which we can learn, and how we can possibly avoid almost the same negative events in the future, like over-drawing a checking account. Reframing can also help us to create a more positive life before actually making any changes in the conditions that surround us. This way of thinking would apply after a serious loss, maybe of a loved one or close friend, or even our driving ability, where would we look for new opportunities? Or what I call, “starting a new chapter”, before thinking about restricting or narrowing our lives.

Reframing Techniques that Can Help

1. Watch Your Thinking Patterns

- a. Educate yourself about some of these negative thinking patterns that increase your stress levels – is our perception accurate, or exaggerated? Catch yourself when you're slowly falling into overly negative and patterns of thinking that cause you stress, and look for something good in what has happened.

For example, in a negative situation, do not tell yourself this- “I didn’t get that raise I expected. I must be a failure; why even bother working so hard.”

But instead, you can say : “ I didn’t get that raise I expected, maybe there is something better coming my way. Maybe I should work even harder to prove that I am better than what I expected”



2. Don't Expect the Worst

- a. Don't build up obstacles in your imagination – instead, minimize every obstacle; only your fear and negative thinking will make them bigger. **Picture success, and have success; picture failure, and have failure.**

3. Substitute Negative Thoughts or Points of View for Positive Ones.

- a. Avoid argument, and when a negative attitude is expressed by others, offer an alternate opinion, more positive and optimistic.

- b. Look for the *gift* in a bad situation, disappointment, or loss – what is there that can be seen as something positive about the negative event?

CONCLUSION

One closing thought that highlights the Positive Psychology approach: *Learn to keep the door shut, remove from your mind, out of your head, and out of your world, every element that seeks admittance with no positivity for your wellbeing.*