



It's Time to Think Positive

Picture a rose bush in full bloom. What did you notice first: the roses or the thorns? A rose bush has plenty of both. But if you focused on the roses and overlooked the thorns, you were thinking positive.

There is a lesson here.

Thinking positive is a choice. It's a decision to appreciate the roses in your life (loved ones, favorite activities, and relaxing moments) while letting go of the thorns (stresses, disappointments, and losses).

This doesn't mean pretending to be happy when you're not. If you're upset, it's important to deal with and talk about your feelings. Thinking positive means choosing to fill your mind with positive thoughts. Your reward will be a calmer, more hopeful attitude.

The benefits of staying positive

"A positive outlook is necessary to prevent depression, to get along with others, and to feel better about yourself and your life," says psychologist Norman Abeles, PhD, past president of the American Psychological Association and an expert on mental health in seniors.

If you have health problems, it's important not to get stuck down in the dumps. "A negative attitude makes you feel worse physically. It increases your stress, which worsens your pain and drains your energy," says Dr. Abeles. On the other hand, "a positive attitude helps you relax and feel more competent" when dealing with everyday challenges.

Dolores Gallagher Thompson, PhD, director of the Older Adults and Family Center at the Veterans Affairs Hospital in Palo Alto, CA., says older adults dealing with health problems become sad that they can't do everything they used to. At that point, some decide they can't ever be happy again.

"I call thinking that starts spiraling downward 'pre-depression,'" she says. "When you start to feel this way, it's time to change your thinking. If you don't, eventually you will become depressed."

How to change your mind

If you tend to count your worries instead of your blessings, it's time for a fresh approach. Here's how to start thinking more positively.

- **Reason with facts, not feelings.** Changes in your life can make you feel uncertain and anxious. You may then fear the worst. "Step back and get the facts," says Dr. Gallagher Thompson. "Talk to an expert, such as your doctor, and find out exactly what you can expect. Then ask yourself, 'If this was happening to somebody else, what advice would I give them?'"
- **Stay connected.** Keep in touch with friends and loved ones and be open to developing new friendships. Volunteering your time and keeping active in clubs or faith-based groups will help you focus on others more than yourself. "Spend time with positive people who are living active, fulfilled lives," says Dr. Abeles.

- **Plan for your happiness.** Schedule time for pleasant activities as often as possible. Having something to look forward to will keep your spirits up.
- **Become a problem-solver.** Don't just wish problems would go away. Take steps to solve them as quickly as possible, asking for support and help from others.

- **Find the silver lining.** Give yourself time to adjust to change or loss. Change can bring new opportunities: Be open to them. "Your life won't be the same, but it likely can be better than what you imagine," says Dr. Gallagher Thompson.

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Your Prescription for Lasting Happiness

Many people believe happiness is a feeling of pleasure based on some external happenings — you got the raise you wanted, you ate a fabulous meal.

"But true happiness isn't contingent on circumstances; it's a sense of contentment that exists independently of the good or ill fortune that might find you," says M.J. Ryan, author of *365 Health and Happiness Boosters*.

According to Ms. Ryan, you can be happier no matter who you are or what challenges you face by changing your attitudes and learning specific behaviors.

Happiness keys

Try these suggestions:

- **Have something to look forward to.** We all need something pulling us into the future — a dream we want to make come true that gives us the incentive to get up in the morning. So, make a "want-to-do" list that includes things you wish to accomplish.
- **Realize life doesn't have to be hard.** Many people can't enjoy themselves and can't let their guard down because they think that being extra vigilant will protect them." But, you can't prevent disaster by not being happy," says Ms. Ryan. "Your life doesn't have to be hard. It's OK if it's easy."
- **Let go of desired outcomes.** So much of what happens to you is out of your control. All you can do is set your intentions and be willing to deal with whatever happens. Letting go of desired outcomes doesn't mean you don't work toward something; instead, it means if something doesn't happen, you adjust to the opportunities life presents you.

"Unfortunately, most people haven't been taught how to do this," says Ms. Ryan. "They get attached to a certain outcome and then are disappointed when events don't turn out the way they hoped."

- **Get a life.** A recent study found people who excel at work don't put in longer hours than others. The overachievers often have a life outside of work, which makes them happier, more rested and, therefore, more efficient workers.
- **Ask for help.** No one can make it in life, at least not happily, on his or her own. Humans are social creatures, designed to give and receive support." Ask for what you need today, and you're more likely to receive it," says Ms. Ryan.
- **Take a satisfaction break.** It's easy to get so caught up in the rat race of your life that you don't take time to appreciate your accomplishments. So, take a satisfaction break right now. Make a list of the accomplishments of which you're the proudest — then ponder the list and appreciate yourself for all your hard work.
- **Envision what you want.** Each morning, before you start your day, use the power of visualization to create a day full of joy. See yourself handling the difficulties of your work life with equanimity. See yourself smiling at everyone you meet, treating each person with care and kindness. See yourself as the calm in the center of the storm of life. At the end of the day, notice how your day went. Were you happier as a consequence?

- **Do something you love today — if only for five minutes.** What gives you great pleasure that you haven't experienced in a while: going to the movies and eating a bucket of popcorn, reading a trashy book, or calling a friend long-distance? Whatever it is, give yourself permission to indulge today.
- **Notice what's right.** Many people make themselves miserable by choosing to focus on what's wrong in their lives instead of focusing on what's right." Acknowledging what's working in your life or in a given situation is the key to gratitude and happiness," says Ms. Ryan.

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