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# LIFE IS WHAT YOU MAKE IT

*For there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so*

**William Shakespeare**

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**A** little boy called Andy was asked to audition with his classmates for a part in the school play. His mother knew that Andy had his heart set on being in the play and she feared how he would react if he was not chosen.

*On the day that the parts were awarded, Andy's mother went to the school to collect him feeling anxious about the outcome.*

*Seeing his mother, Andy rushed up to her, eyes shining with pride and excitement. 'Guess what Mum', he shouted. Then, with words that can provide a lesson to us all, he said, 'I've been chosen to clap and cheer.'*

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I remember, when I was about ten, I had a little purple autograph book. I asked a friend of my sister to write in it and she inscribed the words: 'Life is what YOU make it!' Those words stuck in my mind and have become a personal mantra, even through some of the most difficult and painful times.

Understanding and knowing that we are more in control of our lives than we sometimes believe is not only reassuring, it is empowering. The way that we think determines the way that we feel and is the control pad for the volume of happiness that we choose to experience in our lives. The quality of thinking essentially determines the quality of life.

Your perspective is your reality and your reality is your perspective. We can make a conscious choice about how we want to interpret every situation. It's the glass half-empty or half-full approach. It's the little boy who celebrates and gets excited about the opportunity to clap and cheer.



## THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING

I certainly know from first-hand experience that a firm belief in the power of positive thinking has bailed me out of many potentially derailing situations.

Thinking positively is not about putting your head in the sand, nor is it about being unrealistic. By developing a positive attitude you still recognize the negative aspects of a situation. However, you choose to focus on the hope and opportunity that is available. This approach helps you to avoid getting locked into a paralyzing loop of bad feeling, and allows you to move on quickly, take action to solve problems and embrace challenges in life that we inevitably experience.

Pressure and stress-related illness are increasingly features of modern-day living. We are all human, and we are designed to experience the whole palette of emotions. Fear and anxiety can grip us all. It is how we manage these challenging situations that is a prerequisite for our overall well-being in the long term.

The writings and teachings of some of the great philosophers over the last 2000 years have been significant. From Epictetus, who said 'What concerns me is not the way things are, but rather the way people think things are', to my favourite quote by Shakespeare who so keenly observed: 'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so'.

The viewpoint extends over centuries from Norman Vincent Peale and his emphasis on the power of positive thinking, to the American psychotherapist Albert Ellis, the creator of rational emotive behavioural therapy (REBT), which led to the formulation of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) – something you may have come across already and something I applaud.

With so many people now rushing to the doctors for a quick-fix subscription of 'happy pills', CBT can be a very potent alternative.

The word 'cognitive' is a term to describe thinking, and the word 'behavioural' is there to emphasize that change is not just about how we think, but also about what we actually do with that thinking.

One of the premier psychologists of our day, Martin Seligman, having first gained prominence in researching depression began to look at factors that contribute to positive emotional health. Seligman and his colleagues identified 24 key factors associated with individuals who report high levels of life satisfaction. The most recent research suggests that out of these 24, five are particularly important: optimism, zest for life, curiosity, the ability to love and be loved, and gratitude.

So, certainly, by being optimistic and by being hopeful of positive outcomes is a step in the right direction.

*Whether you are an optimist or a pessimist might not affect the outcome, it's just that the optimist has a better time in life!*

**James Borg, *Mind Power***

## WHAT IS A POSITIVE MENTAL ATTITUDE?

The term 'positive mental attitude' (PMA) has almost become a bit of a cliché. Many books on success or self-improvement start with a sharp focus on cultivating energy, enthusiasm and optimism in all areas of your life and, in my view, quite rightly so. Developing a positive attitude is the key to health and happiness.



Positivity and optimism are now known to be a root cause of many life benefits. The relatively new science of psychoneuroimmunology looks at how the mind can influence the immune system. The theory is that you will live longer, and be healthier and happier, by cultivating a positive attitude towards life. In addition, you're more likely to be successful, maintain better relationships and have a beneficial influence on those around you.

## THINK ABOUT YOUR THOUGHTS

Identifying and analyzing your thoughts, and understanding your beliefs, are the key to dealing with your life positively.

Did you know we have, on average, about 60–80,000 thoughts a day and the quality of those thoughts is responsible for how we feel and behave? Here is a little poem I have written that will give you something to ponder on.

*Yesterday I had a thought.*

*That thought became an emotion*

*That emotion turned into words, the words fuelled action,*

*The actions became a habit. My habits are my Character,*

*My Character defines my destiny.*

*Today, therefore,*

*I'll think about my thoughts a little more.*



## YOU AND YOUR EMOTIONS

One of the most basic indicators of positivity or negativity is the type and range of emotions that you experience. Emotions can have a very strong impact on how you behave and react. One fascinating idea that is well worth reading about, and which can help you to become more emotionally aware, is that of emotional intelligence. The essential premise of emotional intelligence is that, in order to be successful, interpersonally and intrapersonally, you need awareness, control and management of your own emotions in order to recognize and understand the emotions of those around you.

It is important also to be aware that you feed your emotions with your thoughts.

Imagine you are hosting a dinner party for all your emotions and they are sitting around the dinner table hungrily waiting to be fed. All the usual suspects are there like fear, anger, jealousy, happiness, optimism, joy and an assortment of the good, the bad and the downright ugly. You are there as the host of the dinner party and you can choose which emotion you want to feed.

In the same way, by choosing what you think, you can starve the negative emotions and feed up and boost the health of the positive ones. You are in fact the nutritionist of your soul. What a great concept!

It also helps to remember that, at the bedrock of your thoughts and emotions, are your values and beliefs – deep-rooted ideas that are a result of all your life experiences. These are your life attitudes and they colour and shape your perception of the world. Whereas thoughts are relative, beliefs tend to feel completely true, undeniable and resolute. Negative beliefs, however, can undermine your



joy in life, so it is well worth addressing any negative beliefs and looking to change them for a positive alternative.

Being consciously aware of your thoughts, feelings and beliefs can be a very useful exercise and the ability to challenge our thoughts can be a positive step in helping us to identify negative behaviours and, ultimately, discover positive solutions to problems and opportunities.

I was delighted to find that a new word has been introduced into our vocabulary called 'probortunity'. This inclusive word combines the word problem and opportunity to describe something you want to improve and change for the better. When faced with any problem at home or in the workplace try replacing the word problem with opportunity and, rather than focus on the negatives, actively seek out all the solutions and possibilities. Become a possibilitarian!

## **UNDERSTANDING HABITS**

It is also important to be aware that about 90 per cent of what we think and do is habitual, which means that many of our day-to-day routines are something that we just do and don't necessarily think about on a conscious level. To change any of our behaviours we need to address our thinking and redefine our habits. This can take quite a bit of effort and sometimes we can fall at the first hurdle and give up. In a world that is geared towards instant gratification it may be easier to seek a more immediate solution. My personal view is that if something is worth it, and we stick at it and achieve it for ourselves, the reward is far more pleasurable. Positive thinking and positive self talk is a habit anyone can adopt with some practice, irrespective of their background, education and experience.

The human brain is a magnificent machine and consists of billions of nerve cells with innumerable extensions. This interlacing of nerve fibres and their junctions allows a nerve impulse to follow a number of routes known as neural pathways. When you learn something new, your brain makes connections that create new pathways for activity. Setting up neural pathways is actually quite simple. If a newly learned behaviour is repeated enough times, it eventually gets programmed into the subconscious mind; that behaviour becomes automatic and we no longer have to think about doing it, because we respond automatically. This, simply put, is a habit.

Have you ever arrived at home or work with no memory of how you got there? When you started on your journey, you thought about the first few steps on that familiar path, but somewhere along the way, your brain moved onto more interesting topics, and the next thing you knew, you'd arrived. This is the essence of habits: once you start on a familiar series of actions, you stop thinking about them and you are able to complete them without conscious thought or attention.

Cache memory in a computer is another good analogy. The computer stores commonly used actions where it can access and process them faster. The brain does the same thing. This can work in both a positive and negative way: it can free our minds from dull or repetitive tasks, but it also makes it difficult to stop once we've started.

What separates the positive and negative people is that the positive people have habits and behaviours that are conducive to success, while the negative people have ones that facilitate failure in their lives. Remember: you control your habits – they do not control you. Your life is the culmination of all the daily behaviours that you have.



You are where you are right now because of the behaviours that you have adopted in the past.

It is important to identify which habits in your life lead to negative consequences and which lead to positive rewards. The difficulty in this sometimes has to do with instant gratification. If you change your habits then, more often than not, you're not going to see an immediate effect. It is for this reason that people struggle with diets or can't stop drinking, smoking, or spending money because they can't control the instant gratification that is delivered.

Experts in hypnosis and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP – the art and science of personal excellence) believe that it takes around 21 to 28 days to form the basis of a new habit or behaviour. The time it takes to replace an old one is inconclusive because it depends entirely on the person and how long they have owned it.

Think of behaviour as a tree. A young tree has short roots that you can pull straight from the ground. A behaviour that you have owned for many years is like an adult tree that has long roots that extend far underground.

Human beings tend to take actions to either move them closer to pleasure or away from pain. With that in mind, analyze your bad habits and dig down for the factors underlying them. Why do you eat so much? Why do you drink so much? Why are you negative? Behind all of these habits and behaviours lies a reason. Changing a bad behaviour without addressing the root cause of the problem will only lead to a regression.

As with any newly learned behaviour, you may well experience some internal resistance for the first week or more. This is natural and it's not going to be easy, so you have to mentally prepare for



this challenge ahead of time. After you survive this first week, you will find that your new habit and behaviour becomes easier and easier to do, and soon you don't even have to think about doing it at all.

Stress is the primary cause of people reverting back to their old patterns of behaviour, so be wary of the level of stress in your life and know that a high amount can wipe away a new habit and make you revert back to your old ones.

## **SUSTAINING A POSITIVE ATTITUDE**

Creating and maintaining a positive attitude is the most efficient and low-cost investment you can make in order to improve your life. As I have explained, a positive way of thinking is a habit that must be learned through repetition and conscious effort on your part.

Positive affirmations to condition your mind can be very useful. Try saying things to yourself like: 'I am an optimistic, hopeful, positive thinking person. Yes I accept that bad things can happen in my life, however I choose to look for positive opportunities and outcomes in every situation.'

The question I ask myself every time I encounter a perceived problem is 'what is the probortunity?' It can make a big difference whether you see darkness through the light or whether you choose to see brightness through the shadows.

A positive attitude is not dependent upon your genetic composition: even if you are predisposed to negative thinking you can learn to move your thinking to the positive side.

This depends entirely upon you and how you choose to think.



## AVOID NEGATIVE ATTITUDE GERMS

I have been lucky enough to meet, and work with, some highly successful and inspiring people. What sets them apart and makes them special is their ability to turn a potentially negative thought into a positive one. They are also acutely aware of their attitude and how it affects others around them. They take responsibility for their NAGs – negative attitude germs!

Let me ask you a question. If you had a really bad cold or flu would you walk over to someone and sneeze in their face? Hopefully not!

So let me ask you another question. Have you ever had a bad day when someone or something has annoyed or upset you and you have felt the need to get it off your chest and tell someone else all about it? I am sure that we have all been guilty of that from time to time.

You are, in effect, spreading your NAGs – negative attitude germs.

You may have noticed that when you are with someone who is suffering from a physical or emotional problem, you feel bad too. It's often described as catching their emotion. Researchers have observed this actually happening in real time in the brain, using an advanced magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) machine. It shows the brain of Person A reflects activity in the same area as Person B when they are in close proximity.

The scientific term for this is 'neural mirroring'. This graphically illustrates the danger of hanging around negative, pessimistic people if you prefer to be positive and optimistic. You can 'catch' their NAGs just by being in close proximity.



## BE A RADIATOR

Some people you meet are like drains: negative, listless, doom goblins; and when we come into contact with them they drain us of energy. They like to tell you about all their negative news and prefer to play the victim, wallowing in the 'poor me' mentality. These are the people who when you ask them how they are they will respond with their shoulders slumped, eyelids drooped 'Well you know . . . I feel really . . . bad!' and then they will give you a graphic blow-by-blow account of all their woes and feelings of impending doom! You may well know people like this. Perhaps it is a behaviour you indulge in? Perhaps we all do from time to time, but does it really do us any favours?

Other people, however, are like radiators – full of warmth and vitality. We feel positively energized by them. They appear bright and radiant, look you in the eye and when you ask them how they are, they smile and tell you something positive.

It is amazing how some are so intent on being negative. I wonder whether they get up some days and plan to go into work to 'drain the radiators!' You may well know people like this. It might even be a behaviour that you indulge in. If so, next time you find yourself doing this ask yourself how you will positively benefit from choosing this mindset.

## TAKE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The antidote for negativity is that you accept complete responsibility for your situation. The very act of taking responsibility short-circuits and cancels out any negative emotion that you may trigger. By embracing responsibility you will reap many rewards. The successes brought by this attitude act as a foundation for self-respect,



pride and confidence. Responsibility breeds competence and power. By living up to our promises and obligations, we win the trust of others. Once we are seen as trustworthy, people will willingly work with us for our mutual gain. Making excuses can put the brakes on our progress, while accepting responsibility can lead us to succeed.

It is easy to blame others or circumstances for everything in our lives – past, present and future. It lets us off the hook to some degree. However, ultimately it doesn't help us because we become a prisoner of circumstance and allow everything and everyone around us to dictate our world.

The workplace very often can breed a 'blame culture' where everyone is looking for someone else to blame when things go wrong. Taking personal responsibility is a challenge for some people. Perhaps it is a fear of admitting mistakes which can be perceived by some as failing. However, making mistakes is human and we can't get everything right all the time. To increase your rate of success you will have to be willing to accept that you will make mistakes along the way, the skill is to positively learn from them. Certainly some of the best learning and character-building experiences I have been through are on the back of big mistakes. As James Joyce so eloquently put it, 'Mistakes are the portals of discovery'.

Putting your hand in the air and saying 'yes I recognize I made a mistake', or 'I am responsible for that and this is what I am going to do to improve the situation' is actually quite liberating. Try it.

For example, admitting when we get something wrong and saying 'I'm sorry' can relieve a great deal of tension in any relationship. Humble pie can actually taste quite nice, and it certainly isn't poisonous. I have a huge amount of respect for people who are brave enough to admit when they don't get something right and have the humility to accept it, acknowledge it and then positively move on.



Just because we admit mistakes it doesn't make us a lesser person or inferior to others.

*No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.*

### **Eleanor Roosevelt**

Have you ever heard yourself in an argument say 'This is how YOU made me feel'? The truth of the matter is that no one can actually make you feel anything if you don't allow them to. You choose how you respond and ultimately feel.

Life is a journey and, granted, you may get a little travel sick along the way and you may hit a few potholes. However, by developing a positive attitude you will be much better equipped for dealing with setbacks. It takes practice and, for sure, there will be days when you really struggle to see the sun through the clouds. You may well decide you want to wallow a little and that is OK. The question though is, for how long?

Life is what you make it and what makes your life worth living is your own personal quest and adventure. How exciting and wonderful is that?

#### **Life is what you make it: top tips**

- ✓ The first step to happiness is to make a conscious decision to be happy
- ✓ Choose to be an optimist not a pessimist
- ✓ Use the word probortunity and actively seek out opportunities



- ✓ Think more consciously about what you think about
- ✓ Address any negative attitude germs that you may be spreading
- ✓ Choose to be a radiator not a drain
- ✓ Avoid blaming other people
- ✓ Learn from your mistakes and positively move on
- ✓ Take personal responsibility for all your actions
- ✓ Remember, this is your life and your life is what you make it

*When I was five years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy'. They told me I didn't understand the assignment, and I told them they didn't understand life.*

**John Lennon**

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