

How (and Why) to Stay Positive

By Dr. Travis Bradberry

When faced with setbacks and challenges, we've all received the well-meaning advice to "stay positive." The greater the challenge, the more this glass-half-full wisdom can come across as Pollyannaish and unrealistic. It's hard to find the motivation to focus on the positive when positivity seems like nothing more than wishful thinking.

The real obstacle to positivity is that our brains are hard-wired to look for and focus on threats. This survival mechanism served humankind well back when we were hunters and gatherers, living each day with the very real threat of being killed by someone or something in our immediate surroundings. That was eons ago. Today, this mechanism breeds pessimism and negativity through the mind's tendency to wander until it finds a threat. These "threats" magnify the perceived likelihood that things are going—and/or are going to go—poorly. When the threat is real and lurking in the bushes down the path, this mechanism serves you well. When the threat is imagined and you spend two months convinced the project you're working on is going to flop, this mechanism leaves you with a soured view of reality that wreaks havoc in your life.

Positivity and Your Health

Pessimism is trouble because it's bad for your health. Numerous studies have shown that optimists are physically and psychologically healthier than pessimists. Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania has conducted extensive research on the topic, and often explores an important distinction—whether people consider their failures the product of personal deficits beyond their control or mistakes they can fix with effort. Seligman finds much higher rates of depression in people who pessimistically attribute their failures to personal

deficits. Optimists, however, treat failure as a learning experience and believe they can do better in the future.

To examine physical health, Seligman worked with researchers from Dartmouth and the University of Michigan on a study that followed people from age 25 to 65 to see how their levels of pessimism or optimism influenced or correlated with their overall health. The researchers found that pessimists' health deteriorated far more rapidly as they aged. Seligman's findings are similar to research conducted by the Mayo Clinic that found optimists have lower levels of cardiovascular disease and longer life-spans. Although the exact mechanism through which pessimism affects health hasn't been identified, researchers at Yale and the University of Colorado found that pessimism is associated with a weakened immune response to tumors and infection. Researchers from the Universities of Kentucky and Louisville went so far as to inject optimists and pessimists with a virus to measure their immune response. The researchers found optimists had a significantly stronger immune response than pessimists.

Positivity and Performance

Keeping a positive attitude isn't just good for your health. Martin Seligman has also studied the connection between positivity and performance. In one study in particular, he measured the degree to which insurance salespeople were optimistic or pessimistic in their work, including whether they attributed failed sales to personal deficits beyond their control or circumstances they could improve with effort. Optimistic salespeople sold 37% more policies than pessimists, who were twice as likely to leave the company during their first year of employment.

Seligman has studied positivity more than anyone, and

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he believes in the ability to turn pessimistic thoughts and tendencies around with simple effort and know-how. But Seligman doesn't just believe this. His research shows that people can transform a tendency toward pessimistic thinking into positive thinking through simple techniques that create lasting changes in behavior long after they are discovered.

Your brain just needs a little help to defeat its negative inner voice. To that end, I've provided two simple steps for you to follow that will begin training your brain to focus on the positive.

Step 1 - Separate Fact from Fiction

The first step in learning to focus on the positive requires knowing how to stop negative self-talk in its tracks. The more you ruminate on negative thoughts, the more power you give them. Most of our negative thoughts are just that—thoughts, not facts. When you find yourself believing the negative and pessimistic things your inner voice says, it's time to stop and write them down. Literally stop what you're doing and write down what you're thinking. Once you've taken a moment to slow down the negative momentum of your thoughts, you will be more rational and clear-headed in evaluating their veracity. Evaluate these statements to see if they're factual. You can bet the statements aren't true any time you see words like *never*, *always*, *worst*, *ever*, etc. Do you really *always* lose your keys? Of course not. Perhaps you forget them frequently, but most days you do remember them. Are you *never* going to find a solution to your problem? If you really are that stuck, maybe you've been resisting asking for help. Or if it really is an intractable problem, then why are you wasting your time beating your head against the wall? If your statements still look like facts once they're on paper, take them to a friend or colleague you can trust,

and see if he or she agrees with you. Then the truth will surely come out.

When it feels like something *always* or *never* happens, this is just your brain's natural threat tendency inflating the perceived frequency or severity of an event. Identifying and labeling your thoughts *as thoughts* by separating them from the facts will help you escape the cycle of negativity and move toward a positive new outlook.

POSITIVITY IS CONTAGIOUS



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Step 2 - Identify a Positive

Now that you have a tool to snap yourself out of self-defeating, negative thoughts, it's time to help your brain learn what you want it to focus on—the positive. This will come naturally after some practice, but first you have to give your wandering brain a little help by consciously selecting something positive to think about. Any positive thought will do to refocus your brain's attention. When things are going well, and your mood is good, this is relatively easy. When things are going poorly, and your mind is flooded with negative thoughts, this can be a

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challenge. In these moments, think about your day and identify one positive thing that happened, no matter how small. If you can't think of something from the current day, reflect on the previous day or even the previous week. Or perhaps there is an exciting event you are looking forward to that you can focus your attention on.

The point here is you must have something positive that you're ready to shift your attention to when your thoughts turn negative. In step one, you learned how to strip the power from negative thoughts by separating fact from fiction. Step two is to replace the negative with a positive. Once you have identified a positive thought, draw your attention to that thought each time you find yourself dwelling on the negative. If that proves difficult, you can repeat the process of writing down the negative thoughts to discredit their validity, and then allow yourself to freely enjoy positive thoughts.

I realize these two steps sound incredibly basic, but they have tremendous power because they retrain your brain to have a positive focus. These steps break old habits, if you force yourself to use them. Given the mind's natural tendency to wander toward negative thoughts, we can all use a little help with staying positive. Put these steps to use, and you'll reap the physical, mental, and performance benefits that come with a positive frame of mind. 🌱 August

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Dr. Travis Bradberry is the award-winning co-author of *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* and the cofounder of TalentSmart, the world's leading provider of emotional intelligence tests and training serving more than 75% of Fortune 500 companies. His bestselling books have been translated into 25 languages and are available in more than 150 countries. Dr. Bradberry has written for, or been covered by, *Newsweek*, *BusinessWeek*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Fast Company, Inc.*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Harvard Business Review*.