

Is It Time For an Attitude Adjustment?

For some people the ability to think positively requires very little effort. Each day is a new opportunity to do great things, conquer challenges and to celebrate being alive! Their optimism fills them with thoughts of confidence, motivation to get things done, and the ability to think creatively. Their internal thoughts are self-supportive and “looking on the bright side”. They have a view of themselves as masters of their own fate.

But for some people life is a completely different picture. Their outlook on life is pessimistic and they have adopted a pattern of expecting the worst, seeing only the negative side of a situation. They often view themselves as victims of fate. Their internal thoughts can be full of self-criticism and feelings of powerlessness to make any positive changes in their lives. They may project blame onto external factors (other people, events, bad luck, etc.) for their misfortunes. It becomes a pattern of thinking that seems impossible to change.

These opposite personality styles are presented as an illustration of extremes of positive and negative thinking patterns and attitudes. Most people probably fall somewhere in between or have varying patterns depending on circumstances. If you are a person who would like to think more positively and see that your negativity is making your life difficult... there is hope. You can learn to change your outlook. This attitude adjustment requires being mindful of your thoughts, purposefully editing out any negativity and replacing it with more realistic and positive thinking.

Our thinking patterns and attitudes develop over time and become habitual and automatic. Because the process is so automatic we get the impression that the event *causes* our reaction. In reality it is the thoughts we have about the event that cause our reaction. We can create a lot of grief for ourselves when our habitual pattern of thinking is full of negativity.

According to a seminar I recently attended, led by Lynn Johnson, PhD, the field of Positive Psychology has emerged with much research being done studying the differences between “happy” and “depressed” people. They found that the lives of these groups were not significantly different in terms of the good or bad experiences they have lived through, but in the way they interpret and choose to react to life events. Most importantly, now we know that we can all learn how to be happy!

Action steps to increase positivity and optimism include...

- **Believe** you can be happier. You can choose thoughts and behaviors that promote happiness rather than those that increase sadness, frustration, hostility etc.
- Identify things, people, events in your daily life that you are grateful for or appreciate. Pay attention to the small stuff. Teach yourself to notice more each day by keeping a daily list.
- Think of people in your life who you are truly grateful for and identify the qualities they have that you appreciate. Express your appreciation to them. Notice how sharing your positive thoughts make you and that person feel happy!
- When negative events happen, look for a positive, such as an opportunity to learn something or maybe see that the event brought you closer to others.
- Accept that bad things will happen and that you will survive. One big difference for happy people is that they are not defeated by adversity. They use it as opportunity to attain personal growth and have confidence in themselves to overcome.

- Accept that good things are temporary and appreciate them as they happen but also realize that they are not creators of long-term contentment.
- Do things for others and do things for yourself that you really enjoy. Engage in life with a variety of activity to prevent monotony and boredom. Recreation is an important part of effective stress management.
- Do not expect the worst to happen to you. Plan out your survival strategy for negative events. Remember that happy people experience as much adversity as anyone else but react to it with confidence that they will survive and carry on.
- Use humor to soften the impact of the problems that you do encounter. Laughter changes the chemicals in your brain to really help you feel better.
- Focus on and invest more time in the positives in your life such as people, situations, events and activities where you feel good about yourself.
- Set goals for yourself... realistic long terms goals and identify the action steps you need to do to meet them. Picture positive outcomes in your mind. Get as much detail in your mind's eye until it "feels" real. See yourself accomplishing your goals.
- Exercise. This is another activity that has an immediate benefit of boosting those mood enhancing brain chemicals but also the longer term benefit of giving you overall better health.
- Limit your involvement in the negative drama of others.
- Use your spiritual resources.
- Take care of yourself. Not only your physical health but this includes becoming content with who you are and how you appear to others. Happy people tend to worry very little about what others think.

There are many resources and self-help materials available to further your efforts at positive personal growth. A few of my favorites are The Power of Positive Thinking by Norman Vincent Peale, Zen and the Art of Happiness by Chris Prentiss and 100 Ways to Motivate Yourself by Steve Chandler. To learn more about Positive Psychology I highly recommend Lynn Johnson's book, Enjoy Life: Healing With Happiness. It has been a major resource for this article.

If you feel that you need more help with this process of change or if you find you are unable to maintain positive changes, you may benefit from counseling services. An evaluation by a qualified mental health professional can assess that and help you meet your personal goals as well.

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