

Maintaining a Positive Outlook

Why Have a Positive Outlook?

'Positive thinking actually means approaching life's challenges with a positive outlook. It does not necessarily mean avoiding or ignoring the bad things; instead, it involves making the most of the potentially bad situations, trying to see the best in other people, and viewing yourself and your abilities in a positive light.'¹

The current international health crisis is new and strange for everyone. This can be a challenging time for many of us. Naturally, we are all different and have different ways of thinking. People with optimistic thinking styles tend to approach life challenges with a positive outlook. There are advantages to developing a positive outlook, including better stress management², an association with multiple improved health benefits and more hopeful expectations of the future; and the good news is that optimism can be learned³. In this article we will examine several relevant areas which can affect our mind-set.

Routine

In these uncertain times it is still important to keep a routine – it gives us a sense of control and normality.⁴ This provides us with a foundation for a more optimistic perspective. In the morning we can get up and shower, eat a healthy breakfast, plan our work and our day. It is really beneficial to have something to look forward to. This can be spending time with the people with whom we live, making time for exercise, time for home entertainment or hobbies, or for those vitally important social connections facilitated by technology. It is now crucially important that we maintain our connections with others. We can also use extra time at home to learn a new skill, but this is not essential. What is important is looking after ourselves and remaining hopeful. In general, adhering to a healthy lifestyle which includes enjoying nutritious meals, regular exercise and a regular sleep routine provides us with a really solid base for good physical and psychological health.

Focus

We can ask ourselves what kinds of things do we focus on. Is the glass half full or half empty? Are we grateful for what we have or are we frustrated by what we don't have? At times in the course of our lives we will encounter crises and milestones, or even a confluence of challenges, and these will need our attention. Despite this reality, we can choose a thinking style which can be conducive to positive mood. There will be some clues to our own personal thought patterns in the language we use, both

¹ Cherry, K. (2019). Understanding the Psychology of Positive Thinking. Retrieved from <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-positive-thinking-2794772>

² Brown, A. (2019). 62 Stress Management Techniques, Strategies and Activities. Retrieved from <https://positivepsychology.com/stress-management-techniques-tips-burn-out/>

³ Kim, E.S., Hagan, K.A., Grodstein, F., DeMeo, D.L., De Vivo, I. & Kubzansky, L.D. (2017). Optimism and Cause-Specific Mortality: A Prospective Cohort Study, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, Volume 185, Issue 1, Pages 21–29, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kww182>

⁴ Ní Fhlanagain, J. (2020). You OK? Episode 1. Podcast. Dublin: RTÉ <https://www.rte.ie/lifestyle/living/2020/0402/1128070-listen-your-psychological-survival-guide-during-covid-19/>

verbally and internally: E.g. 'I believe in myself. If I have to face a challenge, I know if I give it my attention and try to remain optimistic, I can often cope better and achieve a better outcome'.

If we notice that we often use a negative thinking style we can ask ourselves 'Are these thoughts and feelings serving any constructive purpose?' It may be far more beneficial to focus our minds on other things. It can also be beneficial to learn about and associate ourselves with, people who make us feel positive, uplifted and inspired.

There will always be elements of good and bad in life, but what we focus on is important. If our mind is focused on bad things, we will have darker feelings as a result. If we can mostly direct our attention to the good parts of our lives, we can also expect to experience brighter and more balanced emotions.

Emotions

We are currently likely to experience a range of emotions in response to the situation we are living through. Emotions can be complex things. All humans face challenges and this is an unavoidable part of life. When we have negative experiences it can leave us feeling despondent, upset or angry. When bad things happen or when challenges come to us, it is completely valid to feel emotions such as sadness or anxiety. However, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, a field of study within the area of Psychology, tells us that our thoughts determine our emotions. 'Emotions don't follow inexorably from external events but from what you *think* about those events, and you can actually change what you think.'⁵ Constructive and determined thinking will yield emotions that are happier and more assured.

Gratitude

Gratitude is a practice which allows us to consciously recognise what we have and can be thankful for and, which increases our own wellbeing in the process.⁶ Importantly, gratitude shifts our emphasis from negative ideas and emotions on to positive ones. There are various tools which can assist us in fostering a greater sense of gratitude. These include keeping a gratitude journal that can be updated daily; making a list of things we appreciate in our lives; thanking somebody else for their positive impact on our lives – in person, on the phone, by letter or email, or by simply acknowledging this in our thoughts; and meditation. Prayer can also be a form of gratitude for people who have a spiritual or religious faith.

Resilience

We can sometimes underestimate how resilient we actually are. If we need a reminder of how we can cope we could consider all of the challenges we have faced and overcome in the course of our lives, great and small. These provide us with ample evidence that we have strength and that we are resilient individuals. Reminding ourselves of our talents, strengths and virtues is a powerful way of connecting with our inner capabilities. We could set aside ten minutes to write down different attributes and

⁵ Seligman, M. E. (2011). Flourish: A New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being-and How to Achieve Them. London: Nicholas Brealey

⁶ Miller, K.D. (2020). 14 Health Benefits of Practicing Gratitude According to Science
<https://positivepsychology.com/benefits-of-gratitude/>

traits that we possess. This can be a fun and inspiring exercise. Remember, we are all unique and valuable.

Humour

During testing times humour can be a very useful coping mechanism. A developed sense of humour can enhance our resilience while bolstering our mental health.⁷ The active generation of our own humour, as opposed to responding to external humour, may assist us in dealing with and recovering from, stressful events.⁸

Thought Catching / Self-talk

One of the skills we can use to promote positive thinking styles is “Thought Catching”. This is where we practice consciously recognising if our self-talk is helpful or unhelpful. This requires an awareness of the thoughts we have. The idea is to start filtering our thinking so that we stop ourselves thinking unhelpful thoughts and instead allow thinking that is helpful and factual. We need to be forensic and challenge the negative thoughts. We can ask ourselves is there really sufficient evidence to support negative thinking. When we become more aware of our thinking style we can start to reframe our ideas, e.g. if we have the thought ‘I *always* fail’, maybe we could reframe this as ‘I don’t *always* fail. I got through school. I have a job. I show my loved ones I care about them. Sometimes I succeed. I *can* succeed’.

Taking Affirmative Action

‘When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves’⁹

We have the power to choose a more positive approach to life, or a given situation. Whether it relates to our mentality or our external lives, there are few things which are as empowering as taking affirmative action. Proactive optimism demands action and effort from us over a period time with a view to achieving a particular goal. Obviously there are limitations on what we may be able to act on at present. However, having an optimistic attitude can leave us well placed to take opportunities that may present themselves, e.g. enjoying extra time at home with family, using this time to learn a new skill, or deciding to just take time to be conscious and mindful that we can simply appreciate this present moment.

Sometimes we must challenge ourselves to change; to rise above our circumstances. It is in this area that having a positive outlook can really yield results personally and professionally. It is true that there are things we cannot change and must accept, and that we will not always succeed. However, if we believe our efforts may yield results we are more likely to try; whereas pessimism can be linked to defeatism – the belief that there is no point in trying. There is an element of self-fulfilling prophecy attached to these opposing mind-sets which echoes an often-cited quote from the past: ‘Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you’re right’¹⁰.

⁷ Cann, A., & Collette, C. (2014). Sense of Humor, Stable Affect, and Psychological Well-Being. *Europe’s Journal of Psychology*, 10(3), 464-479. <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v10i3.746>

⁸ Papousek, I. (2018). Humor and well-being: A little less is quite enough. *HUMOR*. 10.1515/humor-2016-0114.

⁹ Frankl, V. E. (2004). *Man’s search for meaning: The classic tribute to hope from the holocaust*. London: Vintage Publishing

¹⁰ Attributed to Henry Ford

Conclusion

These are undoubtedly challenging times for humanity, for the nation and, for each of us as individuals. By planning our days and keeping to a healthy routine we can give ourselves a semblance of normality and a platform for wellbeing. Maintaining communication links with others is vital at this time of relative physical separation.

It has been shown that there are mental and physical health benefits to fostering a positive outlook. We can notice our prevalent thought patterns by reflecting on our thinking and internal dialogue. Where necessary we can practice thought catching, reframe ideas and take action to change a situation, where appropriate. We can tap in to our resilience, engage in gratitude exercises and use humour to strive for enhanced mental positivity. By utilising these resources we can take responsibility for, and improve, our mental health during this demanding period.