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LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE: *Positive Thinking for Better Health*

When things go wrong, do you see a dark cloud, or do you spot the silver lining? Is your glass half empty, or half full?

Your answers to these proverbial questions reflect your attitude toward yourself and your outlook on life. Your response may even affect your health.

Positive feelings have been linked to a hardy immune system, longer life, and overall well-being in numerous scientific studies. On the other hand, research shows that chronic anger, worry, and hostility increase risks for developing high blood pressure and heart disease. Ongoing anxiety and negative feelings can lead to digestive problems, fertility issues, urinary tract infections, headaches, insomnia, and weakened immunity to viral infections such as the flu.

Of course, bad things are bound to happen, and it's okay — and healthy — to react by feeling angry, frustrated, or gloomy. Remember, though, that you have the power to control how you feel in the long-term. *Your happiness is up to you.*

Sunny Side Up

Thinking positive doesn't mean that you ignore problems and look at the world through rose-colored glasses. It just means that you approach unpleasant situations in a positive and productive way. Finding the silver lining in a cloudy situation enables you to handle stress — enhancing your mental and physical well-being.

Cultivate positive emotions with these strategies:

Pack up your troubles. When you feel angry or sad, employ distraction tactics — look for

humor, tune into uplifting music or turn your attention to something beautiful. Balance the negative with the positive, and take an upbeat attitude to rebound from stress.

Draw on a support network. Surround yourself with cheerful, optimistic people. When you're stuck in a downward spiral, talk to positive pals who inspire and encourage you. Avoid complainers and pessimists and steer clear of



debates — when someone is disparaging or argumentative, give constructive comments and don't engage further.

Help others. Assisting a person in need helps you feel better about yourself and can generate greater stability in life. Research findings show that people who volunteer tend to have higher self-esteem, optimism, and happiness. Volunteering also creates a sense of community because you're making the world, or your piece of it, better.

Leverage your strengths

Emphasizing your strengths — the things that you are good at and the characteristics that allow you to perform at your personal best — helps you feel enthusiastic and confident.

Psychological data confirm that people who feel they are using their strengths have greater expectations and self-assurance compared with those who don't get to use their assets.

Developing and using your strengths will help you get the best from yourself and feel successful. For example, imagine you are part of a committee that is trying to influence a school board to remove soda from school vending machines. One committee member has the strength to speak compellingly at a public meeting, but isn't skilled at organizing teams or coaching others. Another person feels uncomfortable speaking publicly but is strong in team building. That person could successfully build consensus among parents, nutritionists, and others to weigh the issue and reach agreement. Capitalizing on these individuals' strengths to influence the board's decision will help your committee feel positive and achieve success.

Try one of these ways to identify your personal strengths:

Do a Self-Assessment. Take a strengths test, such as the Values in Action (VIA) Inventory of Strengths, available at www.viacharacter.org/ or www/The-Survey. This takes just a few minutes to complete and ranks your top character strengths.

Query colleagues. Ask several people who know you well to identify what they feel are your strengths. With this feedback, look for any common traits or patterns.

Follow your efforts. Look at where you spend your time and get the most done. If you did only that one thing, could you become even better at it? Can you focus your work in a way that leverages that one talent? Will doing so help you perform better?

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When you perform well, you'll smile more and feel better prepared to handle negative circumstances and overcome setbacks. Your resiliency and high spirits will rub off on others — enthusiasm and positive attitudes spread quickly!

Cast a favorable light

Negative attitudes spread quickly, too, but you can nip them in the bud if you look at discouraged feelings as opportunities for constructive change. Acknowledge setbacks — and then turn them around. Here's how:

Recall success. Remember that things frequently go well. Point out difficulties you've surmounted, awards you've received, and comments from people you've pleased.

Accentuate the positive. In tough times, remind co-workers that you've all overcome difficult situations before and you can do it again. Use encouraging statements like, "We will solve this problem together."

Set a limit. It's okay to be negative now and then, but establish a cut-off. For example, complain to a spouse or friend for 3 minutes, and then move on to a happier subject. Or, tell yourself or your co-worker that it's okay to grumble on the way to work, but the negativity stops when you enter your workplace.

Speak Positively

Replacing self-grumbling with praise can make all the difference: The way you speak to yourself profoundly affects your confidence, health, and quality of life. Learn to give yourself positive messages:

Keep track. Monitor your positive and negative thoughts for a day. Notice how positive thoughts make you feel, and intentionally reach

for them.

Perform reality checks. Deliberately stop negative thinking and turn it around. Replace "This situation is bad," with "I will persevere," and "I'm not good at this," with "This task is difficult, but I can learn how to do it."

Use reminders. Place positive statements or inspirational messages where you'll see them every day, such as next to your computer or on the bathroom mirror.

Soothe Stress to Stay Positive

Sometimes doubt and anxieties sharpen your focus and help you get a job done. It's perfectly normal to worry about an upcoming presentation or sweat and fidget before taking a test. But too much stress and negativity makes you less productive. When you feel stress taking over, it's time to take control.

Use this strategy to tame anxiety and keep stress in check:

Exercise. Physical activity takes your mind off what's bothering you and promotes a sense of control. Psychologists agree that moderate, daily exercise helps people resist and cope with stress and improves mood.

Rest. Sufficient sleep keeps body, mind, and spirit healthy. During sleep you self-repair damage from physical and mental strain. After a restful night, you feel positive and have energy to get through the stressors of a new day. Adults should aim for about 7-8 hours of sleep a night and take a 15-minute power nap or meditation break when possible.

Understand triggers. Recognizing situations that set off anxiety will help you manage the consequences. For example, if you know you become

anxious giving a speech, you can rehearse with a friend ahead of time and breathe deeply before walking up to the podium.

Get outside. Deep breaths of fresh air can float negative thoughts away. Take a walk or simply find a place to sit outdoors for a quick break.

Put You on Your To-Do

Focusing on your personal well-being helps you stay energized, productive, and positive. Aim to make self-care a priority:

Set boundaries. Remind yourself that you don't have to be everywhere and do it all. Decline activities that you don't really want to do or that will add stress. Delegate chores and ask for help when you need it.

Create a daily ritual. Carve out time for a morning meditation, an afternoon stroll, or a favorite hobby in the evening. Just spending a few minutes alone reading the news or sipping a cup of tea can rejuvenate your body, mind, and spirit.

Relax. Find healthy ways to unwind — take daily walks, practice mindful breathing, listen to music, or complete a puzzle. Make downtime a regular part of your day.

Take time for yourself and remember, it's not selfish — it's a gift to the people who depend on a healthy, positive you.

Bad things and negative emotions will happen, and it's okay to feel irritated or downbeat once in a while. You'll be healthier and feel better, though, if you make positive thinking a habit. Choose to look on the bright side, with a half-full glass and a silver lining. Cultivate positive emotions, and make a positive difference for your well-being.



* Negative emotions are inevitable and not always bad, but too many can leave you feeling burdened, depressed, and physically ill.

* Positive thinking is powerful — it boosts your immune system and improves coping skills.

* When something bad happens, you can choose to accentuate the positive, find humor, and spread good cheer.

* Working from your strengths helps you feel energetic, hopeful, and successful.

* Giving yourself positive messages improves your confidence, health, and optimism.

* Taming stress and taking care of yourself helps you stay energized, productive, and upbeat.

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