

Why Positive Thinking Doesn't Work And What Does Work Instead

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One of the most common pieces of advice offered to people interested in personal development is to “think positive.” In fact we are often told that personal success and happiness are virtually impossible to achieve if you have frequent negative thoughts.

I would like to suggest that telling people they need to always engage in positive thinking is one of the worst pieces of advice one could possibly get. Let me explain why.

What do negative thoughts come from?

If you are having negative thoughts—such as, *“I’ll probably fail at this new project,”* *“He doesn’t really love me,”* and, *“I screwed up again”*—they are the result of negative beliefs formed earlier in your life.

For example, the thought, *“I’ll probably fail at this new project,”* is the result of beliefs like, *“I’m not good enough,”* and, *“I’m not capable.”* The thought, *“He doesn’t really love me,”* is the result of beliefs like, *“I’m not loveable,”* and, *“Men can’t be trusted.”* And the thought, *“I screwed up again,”* is the result of beliefs like, *“Nothing I do is ever good enough.”*

So what will keep you from achieving personal success and happiness is not your negative thinking, but the fact that those thoughts are reflections of the way you view

the world. And you always act consistently with your beliefs about life, people, and ourselves. Even if you could get rid of the negative thoughts that arise from your beliefs, the beliefs would still be there running your life.

What do most people do to keep from having negative thoughts?

If you try not to be aware of what you are thinking, you will probably end up trying to suppress those thoughts. At worst that just won't work. At best the thoughts will stop, but they haven't disappeared; they have only been driven underground. They are like a beach ball you are trying to hold underwater: you can do it for a while, but eventually you will get tired of holding the ball down and it will pop out of the water.

The beliefs about yourself and life that cause your negative thoughts would still exist and would continue to drive your behavior. So trying to put positive thinking on top of negative thinking not only doesn't work, but also deceives you into thinking you've gotten rid of it when really you haven't.

Moreover, suppressed thoughts and feelings usually manifest in some form of behavior when you least expect it. Often, suppressed anxiety results in stress we can't seem to find the source of and suppressed anger often resulted in angry outbursts that seem unprovoked. In addition, a significant body of research (<http://www.examiner.com/article/research-links-cancer-with-repressed-unresolved-feelings-and-emotions>) has shown that suppressed negative feelings often result in illness.

An alternative to suppression is positive affirmations. Many people stand in front of a mirror daily and say out loud: "I am good enough. I am capable. I am loveable." Rarely does this practice change anything because deep inside you know what you are saying is not true to you. What you are saying out loud is: "I'm good enough."

What you are thinking is: *“But I know I’m really not. “I am capable”—“But I know I’m really not.” “I am loveable”—“But I know I’m really not.”*

Another way to understand why affirmations rarely work is to ask yourself: *“Who would stand in front of a mirror uttering positive statements about themselves?”* People who really believed what they were saying would never do that. So in a very real sense people who use positive affirmations are really reminding themselves of the negative thoughts they are trying to escape.

How can we really eliminate our negative thoughts?

So, if positive thinking doesn’t work when we are having negative thoughts, are we doomed to live with that little voice that constantly invalidates us?

As we have seen, almost all negative thoughts are the result of negative beliefs. A belief is a statement about reality that we feel is the truth. As long as we feel that *“I’m not good enough, I’m not capable, and I’m not loveable,”* are really true about us, we will act as if they are true. Our beliefs determine how we feel, how we act, and how we perceive things.

The only really effective way to eliminate negative thoughts and the negative beliefs that cause them is to eliminate the beliefs—not try to cover them up or pretend they are gone.

The Lefkoe Belief Process (LBP), which I created 29 years ago, does just that. Here are the steps of the LBP so you can eliminate a few of your own negative beliefs on your own. Don’t just read how to do it; actually identify a negative belief you hold, and use the process I describe to eliminate it.

How to eliminate the beliefs that give rise to negativity in

your life

Take a look at a given belief and find the earliest possible source. What happened that led you to form the belief? For example, being criticized frequently by your parents for not living up to their expectations would lead most young children to conclude, *“I’m not good enough.”* Mom and dad not being around physically when young children want them or being there physically but not present emotionally would lead them to conclude, *“I’m not important.”*

Once you’ve found the source of a belief, realize that your belief is one “valid” interpretation of your experiences. And then realize that there are other possible interpretations that hadn’t occurred to you at the time you formed the belief, but, nevertheless, could just as easily account for the events. At which point you realize your belief is only *a* truth, not *the* truth.

For example, being frequently criticized for not doing what your parents expect of you could mean you’re not good enough. It also could mean your parents have unreasonable expectations. Or your parents might think you’re not good enough but they are wrong. Or maybe you weren’t good at doing certain things but that doesn’t mean you’re not good enough as a person. Or maybe you weren’t good enough as a child but that doesn’t mean it will always be true.

We think we can “see” the belief

Then the crucial part comes: Put yourself back into the events that led to the belief and, as you look at them, ask yourself: *“Doesn’t it seem as if I can ‘see’ [the belief]?”* The answer for visual people will always be: *“Yes. And you would have seen it too if you had been there.”*

Then ask yourself: *“Did I really see it?”* Because if you really saw it, you would be able to describe it with a color, shape, location, etc. When you realize that you can’t

describe it, you immediately realize that, in fact, you never really “saw” the belief. You only saw events, but the meaning of the events—in other words, the beliefs you formed about the events—existed only in your mind.

At this point, for most visual people, the belief is gone. It existed and resisted being extinguished because you thought you had seen it. As soon as you realize you never saw it in the world, that it existed only in your mind, it is no longer something you thought you discovered and saw in the world; it is only one interpretation of many possible interpretations that has existed only in your mind.

As the final clincher, ask yourself if the events that led to the formation of the belief have any inherent meaning. Did they have any meaning before you give them a meaning? By that I mean, can you draw any conclusion for sure from these events? You will quickly realize that the events that led to your belief have many different possible meanings; there is no one meaning that is inherently true. So, while the events might have had consequences at the time they happened—in other words, they could have been profoundly upsetting—they have no inherent meaning. Any meaning exists only in your mind, not in the world.

Don't try to *think* positive, *be* positive.

To summarize: Beliefs are statements about reality that we feel are the truth, that are facts about the world. We are convinced our beliefs are true because we think we saw them in the world. Once we realize we never saw the beliefs in the world—that they were only in our mind—the beliefs will be gone forever.

Instead of positive thinking, which doesn't work in the long run and which can lead to serious consequence, eliminate the beliefs that are causing your negative thoughts. At that point you won't have to try to *think* positive, you will *be* positive.

Learn to be positive right now: 14 Things Positive People Don't Do

(http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/10-things-positive-people-dont.html?utm_source=post&utm_medium=learntobepositiverightnow&utm_campaign=innerlink)

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