

POSITIVITY IN EVERYTHING

As we age it's very easy to slip into negativity. Our brains seem to be more attuned to stress and danger. We readily succumb to fear. Dr. Rick Hanson, a neuropsychologist, calls this living in the "Red Zone". He defines the polar opposite position as the "Green Zone" where we are actively meeting our basic needs for safety, satisfaction and connection with others.

For me, positivity is subtle. We can unwittingly slide out of the "Green Zone" into a "Pink Zone" where we are captured by an unnoticed negativity that can gain speed and strength. It is so easy to fall into limiting beliefs and self-talk such as, "I can't do that" or "That will never work" or "There will be too many people". Oftentimes we fall into negative thinking as it seems logical, true and valid, but we have no objective facts to support our firmly held contention.

So how do we stay positive? The first step is to live in awareness. How do we accomplish this nebulous feat of living in awareness? Modern psychology teaches mindfulness practice which we used to call meditation. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, taught the Examen, a twice-daily practice of reflecting on the movements of our heart in regard to others, our very lives and ourselves. Regardless of one's choice, and the choices are many, the essence of achieving awareness is to activate and strengthen what psychologists call our observing ego or observational self. It's the ability to observe the thoughts that come into our minds, the feelings that come into our bodies, what we are inclined to say or do, and then evaluate them. Then decide if the thoughts, feelings, what I'm inclined to say or do, are negative or positive. If negative, replace with the positive.

Let's look at four areas where we can examine how positive or negative we are.

Thoughts: The first area is our thinking or self-talk, whether spoken out loud or silently in our mind. We have to realize and accept that a thought is just a thought! It's an electrical construct in the billions of neurons in our brains. If we buy into it, we are stuck with it. It becomes our truth, our world, and our reality. The pivotal issue is to have freedom or choice about our beliefs/thoughts and to realize that we all have weird or crazy thoughts; but we can evaluate them on our own or by consulting with others to ascertain if it makes sense to throw out the thought or belief or to freely retain it. For example, I might believe evolution or global climate change are fictitious; but after further investigation, I might believe they have some merit. It's important to retain an open mind, as issues are generally more complex than we initially realize.

Another avenue in addition to self-awareness and self-examination is to invite feedback from a trusted friend. Do you see me as a negative or a positive person? Staying in negativity sparks the production of Cortisol, the stress hormone that then adversely impacts our psychoneuroimmune system and our neurogenesis, making us more vulnerable to illness and disease.

Another practice is to write down any negative or limiting thoughts or beliefs to get them out of our head. Draw a line down the middle of a blank piece of paper

and write down any negative self-talk or beliefs in the column on the left. On the right side, write down a new positive belief or self-talk. It's important to not simply make it the opposite because it will probably be too much to believe. Make your positive beliefs as believable as possible. Instead of moving from "I'm a big procrastinator" to "I never procrastinate" say "I'm becoming more and more aware of my tendency to procrastinate and I'm procrastinating less and less each day". Our brains believe whatever we tell them.

Feelings: The second area is how we feel. We say that feelings are neither right or wrong, they just are. Happily we can change our feeling state by changing our thinking or moving our body. Generally positive thinking creates positive feelings while the opposite is also true. For example, "I believe I can do it. I feel confident". Henry Ford said, "Whether you say I can or I can't, either way you'll be right!"

A daily early morning regimen of stretching (15 min.), weight resistance training (15 min.) and aerobic or cardio-pulmonary exercise (30 min.) is a key element in sparking the production of the biochemical/neurotransmitters that elevate our mood. We release stress and feel better. We can change how we feel.

Act or Behave: The third area, which will shape our positivity or lack thereof is the meaningfulness of our daily life. As we wake up, do we have something to look forward to each day? Remember the three key elements of the "Green Zone"- safety, satisfaction and connection. Are we financially secure? Do we have healthy pleasures built into our day? Do we have friends? Are our marital and family relationships as strong as they could be or should be?

Viktor Frankl's classic book, Man's Search for Meaning addresses the reality that life fulfillment comes not from what we encounter or experience but rather how well we manage or respond to our life experiences. As human beings, we are continuously judging or creating meaning to explain our life experiences. Hopefully we have acquired philosophical or spiritual life stances that equip us to successfully navigate the inevitable hills and valleys of life. The Prayer of Saint Francis is an example of a life stance.

Relationships: The fourth gigantic area that gives us feedback about how positive or negative we are in our thinking, feeling and acting is our relationships. How are we doing in this arena? Do we reach out to develop new friends? Are our relationships enriching or draining? Do we complain a lot without realizing it? Do we adhere to that saying, "To have a friend we have to be a friend"? Do we initiate contact or do we passively wait for a friend to call us?

A tool to use in strengthening your relational skills is to use the "Bid System", developed by John Gottman, a noted marriage researcher. Each time someone says something to you or you say something to another person consider it to be a "BID" for a response. We will respond by either turning (1) towards the person, (2) away, or (3) against. The challenge is to notice our first impulse, evaluate it, and delete it if it is turning away or against. To sustain a relationship, we must turn toward the other person most of the time. We must also notice how people are responding to our "BIDS".

Staying positive as we age requires ongoing dedication. Exercise helps. Having friends helps. Possessing a positive worldview or philosophy of life is essential. It's a subtle process. Constant vigilance is needed.

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