

Why Positive Thinking Doesn't Work

Imagine that you're about to give a presentation in front of your entire organization. If you have ever been anxious in a situation where the stakes are high, you've probably received well-meaning advice: *Calm down. Take deep breaths. Think positively, and you will nail this.*

What happens if you can't calm down? You might be frightened by your negative thinking: *If I don't get a grip, I will blow my chance.* Your mind might race as you attempt to shake off uncomfortable, negative thoughts.

Consider [this observation by Ben Hardy](#):

In 2005, the National Science Foundation published an article showing that the average person has between 12,000 and 60,000 thoughts per day. Of those, 80% are negative, and 95% are exactly the same repetitive thoughts as the day before.

If you set out to get rid of your negative thinking, you are destined for failure.

Even ordinary facts can trigger a stream of negative thinking. You observe the outside temperature is 10 degrees, and you are overtaken by a stream of thoughts about how you hate the cold. Joining the line at the supermarket checkout, you experience a flood of negative thoughts about the store and other customers. Another opportunity to mentally rant may be moments away.

Notice how many judgmental thoughts are directed towards others and towards yourself. How many negative thoughts are recycled from yesterday? Watching your thinking, you might conclude you are not a nice person. If your thoughts are not

so nice, you are not alone.

Conducting a workshop, I asked participants to raise their hand if during the past week they had experienced troubling thoughts—anxious thoughts, fearful thoughts, judgmental thoughts, etc. Hands went up, while others looked around the room. When I asked who would be willing to have an LCD screen on their forehead making public their stream of thoughts, everyone laughed.

The fact is, no one has their act together. As [Cary Grant once noted](#) wistfully: “Everyone wants to be Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant.”

What Doesn't Work

To feel better, we try to follow popular advice to drop our negative thinking. Yet, thoughts are not easily controlled, and we may end up increasing our anxiety in the process.

Management professor Raj Raghunathan in his book, [If You're So Smart, Why Aren't You Happy?](#) observes, “Contrary to what many of us believe, [suppressing feelings] doesn't mitigate feelings.” Why? Raghunathan continues,

This is because the parts of the brain that are activated when we feel negative continue to remain activated even if we suppress the feelings. Further, suppressing emotions takes brain capacity, and this means less leftover capacity to focus on the task at hand.

Do we need to adjust our emotions before we change our life? *I'll take action when I feel better* is the mantra of the adjust-feelings-first mindset. Psychologist David K. Reynolds in his book [Constructive Living for Mental Health](#) puts it this way:

You have been taught you must make a commitment, pull yourself together, empower yourself, or make a decision

before you change what you do. That is not so. You may know people who are caught in the trap of trying to make themselves feel like going to work or trying to make themselves feel a deeper commitment to their work or trying to feel more determined.

Life will never give us, as Reynolds puts it, “the feelings [we] want when [we] want them for as long as [we] want them.”

The mind can't pay attention to two things at once. When we try to get rid of our negative thinking, we can find ourselves mentally paralyzed. Reynolds puts it this way:

The more one focuses attention on the suffering—noticing how unpleasant it is, trying to get rid of it, wishing it didn't exist, comparing the self with others who don't appear to suffer in this way, worrying about when the suffering will appear next, emphasizing other difficulties related to it, complaining that it is greater than one deserves and than can be endured, and so on—the more one's attention is diverted from everyday tasks, responsibilities, and joys.

Change begins with acceptance, not resistance.

What Does Work

Releasing our thoughts and feelings begins with acceptance. Experiments run by Harvard Business School professor Alison Wood Brooks found that [embracing anxiety](#) leads to better results.

Brooks conducted an experiment with people about to deliver a speech. She instructed half of the speakers to try to calm themselves to relieve their anxiety. Brooks asked the other half to view their anxiety as excitement, embracing rather than resisting it. Judges evaluated the speeches. Those instructed to interpret their anxiety as excitement were scored as more “persuasive, confident, and competent.”

Notice, those who tried to calm themselves failed; those who didn't fight with their feelings succeeded.

Attempting to calm your thinking with more thinking is like trying to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. If you don't resist your feelings, fresh thoughts and feelings will naturally replace problematical ones.

Rely on Purpose

"There is no such thing," Michael Neill writes, "as a solution to a feeling." Neill continues in his book [The Space Within](#), "Because we don't recognize this fact, we spend huge chunks of our time and energy trying to 'solve' our feelings by changing them to 'better' ones or eliminating them altogether."

Resisting our latest fleeting feelings, we resist the current moment. By our resistance, the opportunity for change is foregone.

Reynolds advises us to distinguish between feelings and behavior. For example, he writes,

Fears don't need to be overcome. I fly afraid all the time. You have been taught that fears prevent you from doing something, that they paralyze you. That is a myth. Fears should be noticed, checked for information, and accepted. Then get on with the next thing you need to do.

In his book [The War of Art](#), Steven Pressfield shares that famed actor Henry Fonda "was still throwing up before each stage performance, even when he was seventy-five." The lesson: "Fear doesn't go away." Negative thinking never goes away.

Yet, Henry Fonda had a clear purpose; and purpose motivated him to go beyond his comfort zone.

For relief from negative thinking, follow Henry Fonda's example: Identify with your highest purpose, not your fleeting

thoughts.

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