How to Become a Positive Thinker



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For almost a century, mothers have read the inspiring story of *The Little Engine That Could* to their children. Mothers may not realize the powerful message of confidence and willpower illustrated by the little blue engine struggling to climb a mountain and deliver a train filled with toys for the children on the other side. But their children do, turning the phrase "I think I can" into a personal mantra. A Methodist clergyman reinforced a similar theme in his best-selling *The Power of Positive Thinking,* which was published in 1952 and is still popular today. Today, the message of positivity is being carried around the world by such luminaries as life coach and

author Tony Robbins and his message of success.

Does positive thinking work?

Though science has yet to find the exact link between positivity and the human brain, study after study suggests a definite cause and effect. Johns Hopkins Medicine asserts that a positive attitude improves health outcomes and life satisfaction generally. More importantly, their research proves that each of us has the power to become more confident and positive in our lives.

Positive thinking changes the brain's chemistry by producing serotonin and dopamine ("feel good" hormones) in neurons originating in the middle of the brainstem. In turn, they affect genetic markers and can change brain cells. The change of genetic traits is a catalyst for our well-being and future generations. Positive thinking is also associated with an increase in cells that boost your immune system. Psychologist Daniel Goleman asserts that the brain's reaction to positivity is "enhanced creative thinking, cognitive flexibility, faster processing and a widened span of attention."

Becoming a positive thinker

Some people seem to be born with positive attitudes. Fortunately, those not so lucky can learn to be positive thinkers and gain self-confidence. There are hundreds, possibly thousands, of self-help practitioners who have programs that can improve one's self-image and positivity. Developing a positive attitude is typically a process of discarding and replacing old habits of negativity with confidence. While some may be hard to break, no habit is too embedded to be changed.

Most suggest some variation of the following actions to master positivity:

1. Surround yourself with optimistic people

People, especially mothers, have long recognized the power of association. Aphorisms such as “A man is known by the company he keeps,” “Lie down with dogs and you’ll get up with fleas,” and “Birds of a feather flock together” are proof of the influence of one’s companions on our behavior and attitude. Jim Rohn, a well-known motivational speaker, claims that each person is the sum of the five people they spend the most time with. If you associate with negative, cynical or unhappy people, odds are you will be the same.

Engage with the people you most admire and who represent the kind of person you want to be. They will, in turn, inspire you to be the best person you can be.

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2. Embrace your accomplishments

Every life is filled with wins and losses. Our attitude is often the difference in whether we consider the cup half-empty or half-full. Practice celebrating the victories – even the small ones – such as meeting a deadline, accomplishing a task you dislike or solving a difficult problem. Consider obstacles and setbacks as problems to be solved by recognizing the knowledge gained through failure. When asked about the years of failed experiments to create the light bulb, Edison replied, “I haven’t failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.”

True success comes from persistence, effort and applying the lessons of the past. Failures are always temporary unless you give up.

3. Turn capacity into capability

Humans are born with an enormous amount of *capacity* – one's innate physical, intellectual, and emotional abilities – but little *capability* without learning and practice. For example, a child has the physical equipment to walk (two legs) but needs training to master the skill. The Einsteins and Hawkings of the world do not spring from the womb spouting "E equal MC squared" or theories about black holes. Their insights were the result of years of study, faulty hypotheses, and tedious mathematical calculations. In other words, they transformed their capacity for intellectual breakthroughs into capability.

Being positive does not mean foolishness or false confidence, but a recognition of one's current abilities, realistic expectations of likely outcomes and the willingness to accept small victories until the desired result is achieved. A "pivot" is not a failure, but a change to a better approach.

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4. Build positive momentum

Change most often occurs in tiny, hesitant steps. The first step is always the hardest, but once you've taken it, the second is easier. The more you do, day-by-day, and the more you celebrate your wins along the way, the more positive you will become. That positivity has a ripple effect. As momentum builds, you'll want to do and achieve more in all different areas of your life.

One of the most unproductive ways to deal with a difficult situation is to beat yourself mentally. You will never be happy and content unless you manage your negative self-talk and treat yourself well. Many find the fastest way to feel better after a disappointment is doing something nice for someone. Doing good makes us feel better, and the people

around us will respond in kind.

Final thoughts

Perception is the lens through which we view reality. Perceptions influence how we focus on, process, remember, interpret, understand, synthesize, decide about and act on reality. However, as stated by *Psychology Today*, the main problem is that "The lens through which we perceive is often warped in the first place by our genetic predispositions, past experiences, prior knowledge, emotions, preconceived notions, self-interest and cognitive distortions."

We change our perceptions by desire, education and practice. Some criticize the practice of "fake it until you make it," equating the sentiment with self-deception. However, a more thoughtful understanding is that we become what we practice. Writing *The Story of Philosophy*, Will Durant recognized long ago that "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

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