# Positive Thoughts + Positive Actions = Positive Results

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“The power of positive thinking” has been a catchphrase among myriad motivational speakers, from Socrates to Tony Robbins to Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, a Methodist preacher best known for his 1952 book of the same name. More broadly, it seems nearly every person of achievement, from football coach Vince Lombardi (“The man who wins is the man who thinks he can.”) to the Dalai Lama (“In order to carry a positive action, we must develop a positive vision.”) has acclaimed its value.

The phrase appears so often, in fact, that it has partially lost its legitimacy as a foundation for success, but that problem lies with the messenger, not the message. The truth is that the power of positive thought is as relevant today as at any point in human history. In assessing that, I’m frequently reminded of “The Man Who Thinks He Can,” by the late-19th-and early-20th-century poet, Walter Wintle, which reads in part:

*Life’s battles don’t always go*

*To the stronger and faster human,*

*But sooner or later the people who win*

*Are the ones who think they can.*

## Thoughts are great, but without

## action, they're a mirage

People often confuse positive thinking with a wishing well – that if you believe you will win the lottery, it will happen and/or "Think like a millionaire, and you'll grow rich." Most people recognize the absurdity of these outlooks, however, because while attitude is essential, it is impotent without action. For example, sports and self-improvement gurus often recommend "visualization" to generate positivity – that by regularly closing your eyes and mentally seeing yourself with the perfect golf swing, in the corporate corner office or acing the semester final, they will happen. But in fact, a study at the University of California found that students who spent time each day visualizing a high grade in an upcoming exam received *lower* marks than expected, due to studying less as a result of this newfound confidence. Imagination without action is like wisps of smoke from a dying fire; they appear and fade away as if they were never there.

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## A catalyst for action

Positivity is the mental state that prods people to accept challenges and overcome obstacles. Its power resides in the physical, mental and emotional energies that result from belief in oneself. Positive thoughts promote self-confidence and self-esteem – assets necessary in order to persist in achieving goals. Like the coal and wood that powered railroad steam engines, they fuel the drive to victory, but like all fuel sources, need to be replenished and stoked continually. In part this is because human brains are wired for negativity – the evolutionary outcome of our ancestors living in a dangerous world. Those who expected the worse exercised caution and survived to produce children, whereas those given to "I *think* I can run faster than that lion" were often early winners of a Darwin Award (aka eliminated from the gene pool).

Such ingrained caution is no longer an asset, however, but an obstacle to personal progress and experiencing the joy of being alive.

Overcoming this psychological ball and chain requires effort and reinforcement. Thinking positive thoughts rewires our brains to think optimistically by implementing a process called Hebb's rule, proposed by Canadian psychologist Donald Hebb in 1949. Put simply, it states that "Neurons that fire together wire together." In other words, the more we do something, the more it becomes hard-wired in our brain.

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## How to foster positive thinking

There are thousands of articles and self-help books with tens of thousands of suggestions on creating and reinforcing a positive attitude. Some work better for each individual than others, but they tend to share a consistent theme of repetition – that doing the same exercises over and over until results in an acquired behavior, one so ingrained that it's virtually automatic.

Some ways to make positivity a reflex:

• Start each day with good thoughts: Take a couple of minutes every morning to look in the mirror and say aloud, "This will be a great day," "I will enjoy this day" and "I can make good things happen." Winning begins with convincing yourself that you can and will.

• Focus on the small, and immediate: Take things one step at a time as you go through the day. It's easy to be overwhelmed by focusing on a future result instead of the immediate task.

• Look on the bright side, even in bad situations: Whether we see opportunity or obstacle depends on attitude. One great example is a friend of mine who used the constant traffic

delays of his commute as an opportunity to practice the blues harp — transforming what might have been frustration to moments of joy.

• Turn failures into lessons: Everyone makes mistakes; it's the way we learn, not a test of worth. Failure happens to everyone, every day. Thomas Edison is said to have experienced a hundred failures in his four-year effort to invent the commercial light bulb, and Babe Ruth struck out far more often than he got on base. Failure only matters if you quit.

• Celebrate victories: Take pride in accomplishments by celebrating them, especially the small ones. By marking these successes, you permit others to do the same, reinforcing an environment of positivity. And don't confuse rewards with celebrations: The former come at the end of the process, while the latter are about *appreciating* the process.

• Love yourself: We are often our own harshest critics, perhaps considering failure a consequence of "not being good enough." Loving yourself means recognizing the knowledge gained from experience, a willingness to venture outside your comfort zones and the resiliency to try and try again.

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Positive thinking can help you overcome obstacles, deal with pain and reach new goals, and research studies consistently find that optimistic people experience increased marital satisfaction, better physical health and higher incomes. That said, it can't replace positive action. Success requires persistent effort — doing the hard work to accomplish goals. Unless you are the beneficiary of family wealth, your net worth will result from intelligence, effort and resilience, and whatever your path, it's unlikely to be consistently smooth and straight. Life is cyclical and obstacles and detours are the realty, and positivity is nothing less than essential in overcoming them.

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