

Life Tools for Lawyers: Practice Optimism

Positive Thoughts—Better Health

A positive attitude can lead to higher energy levels, greater creativity, and an improved personality. A negative attitude can intensify the stresses in your life—particularly significant given that some research suggests that up 80% of disease is caused by stress.

The challenge is in learning how to counter the detrimental influence of stress and the thinking processes associated with anxiety, fear, and apprehension.

Negative thoughts affect the functions of the mind and the energy of all cell structures of the body, and this changes the nutritional and absorption processes that keep the body healthy. Optimism is an anchor of good health.

'Learned Optimism' Benefits Health

Optimism can be learned. People who learn to maintain an optimistic attitude may avoid depression and improve their physical health, according to a controlled study by the University of Pennsylvania's Martin Seligman, PhD, and Gregory Buchanan, PhD.

The most pessimistic of a group of students took a workshop on cognitive coping skills and they reported fewer adverse physical problems and took a more active role in maintaining their health.

Workshop participants learned to dispute their chronic negative thoughts and learned social and work skills that can help avert depression.

Avoid Wishful Thinking

Many of us have been discouraged by practitioners of Positive Thinking who we see as being willfully ignorant of negative realities, perhaps in a state of denial. In deciding to be optimistic, you must make room for caution about this brand of positivism.

Beware positive thinkers who cling to how things "should" be and, when reality fails to measure up, retreat into an unrealistic faith that good will prevail through mere thought.

If your life situation is distressing, if you are suffering from depression, if you are socially isolated, mere positive thinking will not suffice. You need

to connect with friends, family, and the medical profession to provide the support you need.

Developing a Positive Outlook

If your goal is to change from a pessimistic outlook to optimism, then there are techniques you can practice to develop new positive habits. At first, practicing the techniques may take all your mental resources. Later, they become habit.

Negative thinking is the negative side of suggestion. You want to substitute positive suggestions. Three habits are useful to overcome negative thinking.

Habit 1: Thought Awareness

Thought awareness is the process when you notice your negative thoughts and identify them for what they are. Observe them and let them pass.

What you can hang on to is the negative factual information that you receive in the feedback you get from the real world. It is not negative thinking to observe, recognize, evaluate, and correct negative factual situations—it is problem-solving and positive action.

If there is no solution to the problem within your grasp, and you have explored your options in conversations with family, friends, or counselors: practice acceptance.

When you will not accept what you cannot change, you enter an internal struggle with it which can only bring you pressure, pain, frustration, anxiety, and disease.

Habit 2: Rational Thinking

When you have observed a factual basis within negative feedback, review it rationally. Many negative thoughts cannot stand up to challenge. If not noticed and challenged, they persist and undermine.

What you want to avoid is interpreting and obsessing over negative feedback that is not factual. Inner tirades against yourself and the world generate megabytes of stress. And they don't solve anything.

Habit 3: Focus on the Positive

Focus on the positive. Instead of thinking of all your unfulfilled dreams, give yourself credit for the many accomplishments you have achieved to date. Make a short list of positive things to refer to when your spirits are lagging: your five favorite memories, three exciting events in your future, the things you are thankful for.

Many people benefit from positive affirmations. You can reprogram yourself, using affirmations, to be positive and confident. Make your personal affirmations simple and clear and base them on rational assessments of fact.

Affirmations are meant to boost your self-esteem. Self-esteem is based on two things:

- your sense of how valuable and lovable you are
- your sense of your competence and talents

If the people around you are negative towards you, or your job undermines your confidence, then change the people or situation so you are not subjected to negative suggestion.

If you are plagued by self-doubt, the best affirmations will be those you have actually received from others who have acknowledged you in some way. Write down any good things people say about you. Make that your personal list of affirmations.

Samples of affirmations:

- I am equal to the task.
- I can achieve my goals.
- I am completely in control of what I can control in my life.
- I learn from my mistakes and they increase experience on which I can draw.
- I am a good and valued person in my own right.

These affirmations are taken from *You Can't Afford the Luxury of a Negative Thought: A Book for People with Any Life-Threatening Illness Including Life* by Peter McWilliams from Prelude Press, Inc.

Online resources for help and referrals:

Center for Mental Health Services: www.mentalhealth.org

National Institute for Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.org

The Help Center of the American Psychological Assoc.:
www.helping.apa.org

National Depressive and Manic Depressive Assoc.: www.ndmda.org

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