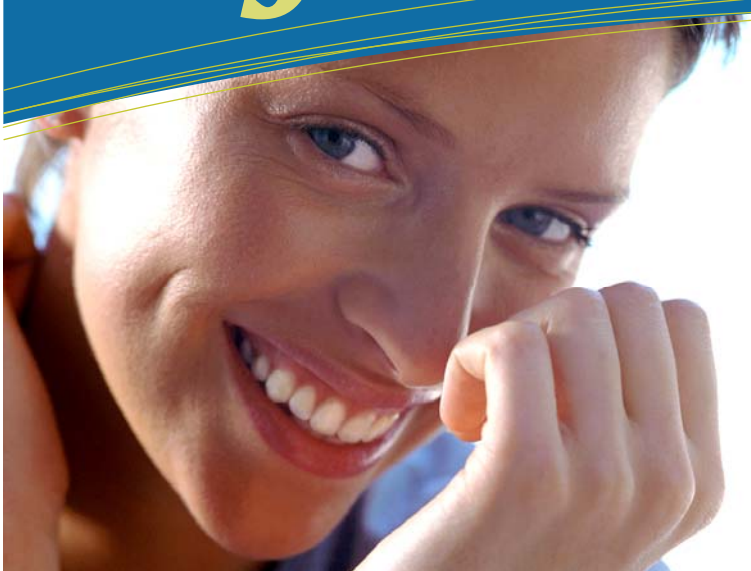


Life CoachingUP date



Prescription Positive: A great way to live... and live longer

By Richard C. Huseman, Ph.D.



Negativity is an illness that affects the health, happiness and longevity of millions. Are you suffering from negativity? If so, is there anything you can do about it?

Are you a positive person? If you said "Yes," are you sure? To be certain, take the following test.

Imagine that you are attending a banquet with ninety-nine other people. You've finished the meal and the banquet is coming to a close. As the toastmaster completes her announcements, she says, "And now for a special surprise. When you entered the room tonight, we wrote each of your names down on a slip of paper. The box in front of me contains all one hundred names. I'm going to stir these names up and draw only one. The person whose name I draw will receive a \$10,000 cash prize!"

You now have two options:

1. Stand up and move toward the podium. The toastmaster is sure to draw your name.
2. Stay in your seat and say to yourself, "It probably won't be me. My chances are only one in a hundred. I never win these things anyway."

If you are like most people, you chose the second option. Realistically, your chances of winning are only one in a hundred. Realistically, you also have absolutely no control over whose name the toastmaster will pull from the box. Since you are now in such a realistic mood, let's offer another scenario.

You are now a prisoner in some far-off land. In fact, there are one hundred prisoners in the room. It's about lunchtime, and the chief guard strolls into the room. He announces: "I've got some bad news for you. We have enough food for only ninety-nine people. So I've written each of your names down on a slip of paper. The names are in this box. I'm going to stir these names up and draw one out. If I draw your name, we're going to take you outside and shoot you."

You now have two options:

1. Stand up and walk to the door. The guard is sure to draw your name.
2. Stay in your seat and think, "It probably won't be me. My chances are only one in a hundred. I never win these things anyway."

The irony in this illustration is that the odds in both situations are identical – one in a hundred. The amount of control we have is the same – none.

If you forgive the pun...

*Most of us think we will get the bullets
and not the bucks.*

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“Emotion travels from person to person like a virus.”

Sigal Barsade
Professor of Management
Wharton School of Business

Negativity and the Ancient Brain

The human brain developed during a time when staying alive was the first priority for our earliest ancestors. Back in the Pleistocene Era, hominid brains were on constant alert to ensure survival: securing food and water, finding protection from the elements, staying alert for predators and other dangers, etc. Hominid brains were programmed to seek out potential catastrophe at every moment and around every corner.

You might pity our hominid ancestors and their “catastrophic brain” but their programming was the key to our successful existence and continuation as a species. And, despite the millions of years that have passed between their existence and our own, our brains still carry much of the same catastrophic wiring.

Excellent evidence of this catastrophic wiring is how the media attracts our attention today. Disaster, death, threats to safety and security, all trigger our catastrophic brains to pay attention and we become riveted to what the media presents as the latest potential dangers to our continued existence. Trying to stay positive and happy when we are inundated with these negative messages is quite a struggle.

Although most people would identify themselves as being “happy” and/or “positive,” studies have repeatedly shown a strong tendency toward the opposite.

- We tend to remember failures more vividly than successes.
- We tend to react more strongly to negative stimulus than we do positive.
- We tend to trust negative information more than we do positive.

Many of us go through our day mostly blind to the good things in life and only pay attention when something goes wrong.

The Six Universal Emotions

Why do we as humans have such a strong tendency toward the negative? Consider the following list established by psychologists as the six universal human emotions.

| | |
|----------------|-------------|
| ANGER (-) | FEAR (-) |
| DISGUST (-) | SADNESS (-) |
| SURPRISE (+/-) | |
| JOY (+) | |

Four of these emotions (in red) are negative. Surprise is considered neutral as it could be both a positive or negative surprise. Joy alone is positive. Psychologists tell us that the ability to focus on negative emotions comes from our ancient danger/recognition system formed early in the brain’s evolution. The pre-frontal cortex, which registers happiness, is the part used for higher thinking, an area that evolved later in human history.

Each of these universal emotions alert us to potential threats and suggest a different course of action.

- **Fear** tells us to run away when danger is near.
- **Anger** tells us to defend ourselves against aggressors.
- **Sadness** warns us to be cautious and save energy.
- **Disgust** urges us to avoid contamination.
- **Surprise** (good or bad) immediately heightens our awareness so that we can evaluate a situation.

Only **Joy** does not prompt a response. Joy simply tells us something good has happened and suggests that we do nothing as our current situation is a good one. Unfortunately, however, joy tends to be very short-lived. While negative emotions can persist over long periods of time, we quickly neutralize joy as we become settled into the status quo and then go back on alert for how our existence might be threatened.

The Hedonic Treadmill

Our inability to maintain a sense of joy causes humans to be like hamsters on wheels. We go round and round constantly seeking joy in our lives, but only achieve it for a short time before we move on to our next endeavor. Psychologists call this the “hedonic treadmill.” We rapidly and inevitably adapt to good things by taking them for granted and then are forced to seek joy elsewhere. For example:

- The elation over a pay raise soon diminishes and work once again becomes a grind.
- The excitement over getting a new car barely lasts to its first oil change.
- The joy over a new computer or other electronic gadget lasts only as long as the next ad showing the more powerful and spiffier model available.

Emotions and the Multiplicity Effect

If you agree that negativity is a construct for an individual human mind, bring them together in community and the effect increases exponentially. Negativity is contagious and spreads quickly, especially within groups of people. “We engage in emotional contagion,” states Sigal Barsade, a Wharton management professor who studies the influence of emotions on the

workplace. "Emotions travel from person to person like a virus."

But, within this information is our first ray of hope. If negativity is contagious, is it possible that positive emotions are also contagious? Of course, the answer is "Yes!" If we can keep ourselves focused on the positive, then we can serve as an antidote to others' negativity and immunize ourselves against further negative contamination.

But, how do we actually break away from our instinctive negative tendencies and seek out the positive in life? Can our brains actually learn to "rewire" themselves toward the positive?

Rewiring the Brain & Neuroplasticity

Recent scientific studies have shown that the brain can actually physically rewire itself. Neuroplasticity refers to the changes that occur as the brain reorganizes itself as a result of new thought(s) or behavior(s).

For example, a new therapy has been shown to improve function in stroke patients.

Traditional therapy methods have patients compensate for their diminished capacity in one arm by learning how to use their still strong arm to accomplish the daily tasks of both arms. Constraint therapy, however, takes the opposite approach. It requires that a patient's strong arm be "constrained" (in a sling), forcing the stroke-affected arm to complete common tasks.

Studies have shown that stroke patients can actually "rewire" their brains to compensate for areas damaged by a stroke.

The results of this new therapy have been very positive. Not only have patients been able to regain more use of their stroke-affected arm, but studies have shown that some areas of their brain normally used for other functions were "recruited" to help move the affected arm. MRI scans clearly showed activity in brain areas that were not active at the start of the therapy. The brain actually physically rewired itself. No matter what our age, we can rewire our neural pathways through our actions and thoughts.

How Powerful is the Brain?

In 1955, Henry Beecher in his paper, "The Powerful Placebo," attributed about 30 percent of all therapeutic effects to the placebo. Basically, a placebo is a sugar pill given to a control group within a medical study. Those given the so-called "dummy pill" are compared to those who received actual medication. People in the study are never told whether they have been given the actual medication/treatment or if they have been given the placebo.

Time and time again, the placebo has proven nearly as effective as the medication it was supposed to control for. In an early (and highly controversial) placebo study conducted in the 1950's, pregnant women suffering from severe morning sickness were told they were being given a new medication to cure their nausea. They were in fact given Ipecac, a drug often used to **induce** vomiting in patients who have been poisoned. To the astonishment of the researchers, instead of becoming more ill, the pregnant women ceased vomiting all together. Despite Ipecac's known effects, the fact that the women had been told it was a cure allowed their brains to override the actual physical effects of the drug.

Thousands of other placebo studies since the 1950's have come to similar conclusions. Placebos are often just as effective as the medicines they are meant to represent. The latest findings have shown that the effectiveness of placebos on average can be as high as 60 to 75 percent!

Why Do Placebos Work?

Not all placebos are created equal. Placebo studies have shown several interesting factors impacting placebo effectiveness:

- Two placebo pills are more powerful than just one.

- Bigger pills are more powerful than smaller pills.

- Injections are more "effective" than pills.

Why would these characteristics play a role in placebo effectiveness? Scientists have concluded that it is because it helps patients **believe** that the "cure" they are being offered will work. The belief in the pill or injection **triggers** the brain to manifest the desired physical response.

So, if what we believe in our minds can heal our physical bodies, consider the potential that a positive mindset and belief system can have on other aspects of your life.

Positively Rewiring the Brain Through Optimistic Autosuggestion

In recent years, many have talked about the power of **optimistic autosuggestion** (i.e., positive affirmations) to **trigger** a positive mindset. But perhaps the best way to understand autosuggestion is to go back to French psychologist, Émile Coué (1857-1926) who introduced optimistic autosuggestion as a method of psychotherapy, healing, and self-improvement.

Coué's infamous and often replicated auto-suggestion was, "Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better." He instructed his patients to repeat this magical mantra every day especially at the beginning and end of each day. This simple phrase produced remarkable health enhancements for Coué's patients during his time and continues to work for many today.

The basic theory behind optimistic auto-suggestion is that by consciously repeating positive statements, people begin to change their way of thinking (rewiring their brain) and manifest the positive in their bodies and lives. They simply rewire themselves to think and believe more positively.



By mentally repeating positive statements, people can change their way of thinking and leverage the positive in their minds. We can rewire ourselves to think, believe and live more positively.

Is the Glass Half-Full?

We have all heard the adage that optimists see a glass as half full and pessimists see it as half empty. But what if I were to challenge you to think a bit differently about the proverbial glass? What if the real problem was that there is simply too much glass? If we could take a laser and cut the glass down just above the level of the water, then both optimists and pessimists would have to agree the glass is completely full.

The same could be said about switching from a negative to a positive mindset. It is about shifting our perspective so we see how full our lives already are.

It is true that many of us in the U.S. are struggling under our current economy. We are facing difficult times. But, before you complain about the price of gas or milk or anything else (thereby continuing the trend of negativity that pervades so much of our society), stop and re-think your situation. Even given the challenges we face, we are blessed. We live in one of the most affluent countries in the world. Consider how much of the rest of the world lives.

- **Almost half the world — over three billion people — live on less than \$2.50 a day (that is \$912.50 a year)**
- **At least 80% of humanity lives on less than \$10.00 a day (\$3,650 a year).**

From this perspective, we can truly be grateful that we can afford to feed our ourselves and our families. Perhaps our dollar doesn't stretch as far as it once did. We might have to cut back on some of our indulgences — cook meals at home rather than dine out, rent movies instead of going to the theater, throttle back on our Starbucks habit, etc. But, given that one "FOURbucks" beverage is more than most people have to live on in a day, we should remember to savor the indulgences we do have even more. We have so much to be grateful for, if only we choose to see it. ✕



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But how can you start focusing on the positive more actively? It is not as easy as one might "believe." Think back to the story at the beginning of the article. Did you think you were more likely to get the bullets or the bucks?

The Prescription Positive

How do we fill our Prescription Positive? How do we stop paying so much attention to all of the inadequacy, difficulty and negativity we feel we "must" endure in our lives in order to focus our attention more on the good in life?

Here are a few **Prescription Positive** suggestions:

- **Believe in the spiritual...** whether it is a personal belief in God and seeking God's will for your life — or simply being in awe of the wonder that is the universe. We are part of something extraordinary and that makes us extraordinary, as well.
- **Have a purpose...** that brings value to yourself and others. What is going to be your contribution to the world today? You have much to offer, but you must offer it in a way that brings value to your life and to the lives of others.
- **Help others...** and tap into the "helper's high." Helping others releases endorphins which give us a sense of exhilaration. Studies have even shown that helping others can even boost the immune system and promote a strong sense of well-being. In helping others, you can also help yourself.
- **Think positive thoughts...** because the mind is a magnet. Consciously focus on the good things in life and they will come to you. Think about the negative and that is what you will attract.
- **Keep positive company...** so that you can share your positive outlook with others and they can share their positive outlook with you. It is much easier to stay positive if you are in like company of other positive, upbeat people.
- **Live in the moment...** and find joy in the now. Don't wait for a new job, car, relationship or other attainment to make you happy. Find your happiness in who you are and how you are living right now.

- **Be content with what you have...** and liberate yourself from the "expectations" of success. To be sure, have goals and seek to attain them. But also acknowledge how much you have achieved thus far from life. Build your life on a foundation of what you have — not what you lack.

- **Live each day with an attitude of gratitude...** for all that you have in your life. We rarely appreciate how blessed we really are. Recognize and be thankful for what you have and everything around you will hold more meaning.

- **Begin and end each day positively...** by mentally or verbally repeating a positive affirmation. You can borrow Émile Coué's "Every day in every way, I am getting better and better." Better yet, make up your own optimistic autosuggestion that will help you "rewire" yourself toward the positive.

The Big Bonus: Prescription Positive & Longevity

Many people are health-conscious. They follow all of the "rules" for eating well, exercise regularly and schedule regular medical check-ups — all with an eye toward securing healthful longevity. But, there is a crucial part of the longevity equation that many people ignore.

In recent months, I became acquainted with a German scientist by the name of Dr. Ronald Grossarth-Maticek. During our conversations, he has shared the results of a fascinating series of studies he has been conducting since the early 1970's. Dr. Grossarth-Maticek developed a **Pleasure & Well-being** survey, which he and his assistants distributed to over 3,000 people in their mid-fifties. He then followed up with the same group of people 21 years later. His findings were incredible.

- Of those who had **high** pleasure and well-being scores (i.e., positive mindsets), **75 percent were alive and well!**
- Of those who had **low** pleasure and well-being scores (i.e., negative mindsets), **only 2.5 percent were still alive!**

So, by following your Prescription Positive and choosing to promote a positive mindset every day, you will actually enjoy a happier more fulfilling life... and a longer life. ✕