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Positive thinking: Practice this stress management skill

Is your glass half-empty or half-full? How you answer this age-old question about positive thinking may reflect your outlook on life, your attitude toward yourself, and whether you're optimistic or pessimistic.

In fact, some studies show that these personality traits — optimism and pessimism — can affect how well you live and even how long you live.

With this in mind, take a refresher course in positive thinking. Learn how to put positive thinking into action. Positive thinking is a key part of an effective stress management strategy.

Understanding positive thinking and self-talk

Self-talk is the endless stream of thoughts that run through your head every day. These automatic thoughts can be positive or negative. Some of your self-talk comes from logic and reason. Other self-talk may arise from misconceptions that you create because of lack of information.

If the thoughts that run through your head are mostly negative, your outlook on life is likely pessimistic. If your thoughts are mostly positive, you're likely an optimist — someone who practices positive thinking.

Living longer and happier through positive thinking

Researchers continue to explore the effects of positive thinking and optimism on health. Health benefits that positive thinking may provide include:

- Decreased negative stress
- Greater resistance to catching the common cold
- A sense of well-being and improved health
- Reduced risk of coronary artery disease
- Easier breathing if you have certain lung diseases, such as emphysema

- Improved coping ability for women with high-risk pregnancies
- Better coping skills during hardships

It's unclear why people who engage in positive thinking experience these health benefits. But one theory is that having a positive outlook enables you to cope better with stressful situations, which reduces the harmful health effects of stress on your body.

How positive thinking gives way to negative thinking

But what if your self-talk is mainly negative? That doesn't mean you're doomed to an unhappy life. Negative self-talk just means that your own misperceptions, lack of information and distorted ideas have overpowered your capacity for logic and reason.

Some common forms of negative and irrational self-talk include:

- **Filtering.** You magnify the negative aspects of a situation and filter out all of the positive ones. For example, say you had a great day at work. You completed your tasks ahead of time and were complimented for doing a speedy and thorough job. But you forgot one minor step. That evening, you focus only on your oversight and forget about the compliments you received.
- **Personalizing.** When something bad occurs, you automatically blame yourself. For example, you hear that an evening out with friends is canceled and you assume that the change in plans is because no one wanted to be around you.
- **Catastrophizing.** You automatically anticipate the worst. You refuse to go out with friends for fear that you'll make a fool of yourself. Or one change in your daily routine leads you to think the entire day will be a disaster.
- **Polarizing.** You see things only as either good or bad, black or white. There is no middle ground. You feel that you have to be perfect or that you're a total failure.

You can learn positive thinking

Instead of giving in to these kinds of negative self-talk, weed out misconceptions and irrational thinking and then challenge them with rational, positive thoughts. When you do this, your self-talk will gradually become realistic and self-affirming — you engage in positive thinking.

You can learn to turn negative thinking into positive thinking. The process is simple, but it takes time and practice — you are creating a new habit, after all.

Periodically during the day, stop and evaluate what you're thinking. If you find that your thoughts are mainly negative, try to find a way to put a positive spin on them.

Start by following one simple rule: Don't say anything to yourself that you wouldn't say to anyone else.

Examples of typical negative self-talk and how you might apply a positive thinking twist include:

Negative self-talk	Positive spin
I've never done it before.	It's an opportunity to learn something new.
It's too complicated.	I'll tackle it from a different angle.
I don't have the resources.	Necessity is the mother of invention.
There's not enough time.	Let's re-evaluate some priorities.
There's no way it will work.	I can try to make it work.
It's too radical a change.	Let's take a chance.
No one bothers to communicate with me.	I'll see if I can open the channels of communication.
I'm not going to get any better at this.	I'll give it another try.

Practicing positive thinking every day

If you tend to have a negative outlook, don't expect to become an optimist overnight. But with practice, eventually your self-talk will automatically contain less self-criticism and more self-acceptance. You may also become less critical of the world around you.

Practicing positive self-talk will improve your outlook. When your state of mind is generally optimistic, you're able to handle everyday stress in a constructive way. That ability may contribute to the widely observed health benefits of positive thinking.

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