

Approaches to Handling the Negative

(Originally published in **Nink**, the newsletter of Novelists, Inc.
Visit the website at www.ninc.com)

The idea of positive psychology is not to ignore that bad things happen. Instead, it's based on that old saying your mother probably told you: It's not what happens to you, it's how you handle it.

So, how do we improve at handling the bad things in our lives?

THOUGHT EXPRESS-LANES

Scientists have proven that a repeated thought stimulates dendritic growth in the brain, so in essence the biological/chemical connections that create a thought become faster the more you have that thought - good or bad.

While new thoughts must take the time to build each connection, the same old thought clicks through in the express lane rut it's already built.

Are affirmations the answer to making thought express-lanes work for us?

University of Pennsylvania psychology professor Martin E.P. Seligman, who is one of the leaders of Positive Psychology is not an affirmation fan.

He writes in *Learned Optimism* that the skills of optimism "do not consist in learning to say positive things to yourself. We have found over the years that positive statements you make to yourself have little if any effect. What is crucial is ... the power of 'non-negative thinking.' Changing the destructive things you say to yourself when you experience the setbacks" of life.

So, more important than affirmations could be the flip side - that by tuning into the negative ruts and saying STOP IT! you could shut down that express lane to negativity.

(There's a "Mad TV" skit with Bob Newhart as a therapist who, when his patient says she's afraid of being buried alive, yells "STOP IT! Have you ever been buried alive? Do you know anyone who's been buried alive? Then stop worrying about it. Just STOP IT!" It actually works.)

SUPPRESSING NEGATIVE AREAS OF OUR BRAIN

Recommendations covered later in this article by Barbara Fredrickson of the University of Michigan from her 2000 article "Cultivating Positive Emotions to Optimize Health and Well-Being" should serve this purpose, but I'm holding out for chocolate.

EXPLANATORY STYLES

Being aware of the three Ps -- permanence, pervasiveness and personalization -- can certainly help. However, Seligman doesn't stop there. Based on psychologist Albert Ellis's ABC schema, Seligman presents an ABCDE approach:

Adversity: Work at being objective about the "bad thing" that sets off a negative response.

Belief: This is your interpretation of the adversity, your evaluation and your inference. These are thoughts, and their accuracy can be checked.

Consequences: These are your feelings - the consequences of your beliefs about the adversity.

Say Artemis Author has a book proposal rejected - that's adversity. Artemis's belief is that he'll never sell again, he's all washed up. The consequences are that he feels defeated, which is unlikely to be conducive to writing a new proposal that might sell.

So, there's the problem, now what's the next step?

Disputation: If you ever said to yourself "get a grip," you were most likely disputing your B after an A, which should change your C - that's the goal. Another "D" can help with this: Distancing. Listen to the statements coming from inside your head under B and then imagine if someone else yelled them at you. Would you believe them? Would you slug the person saying them? Then maybe they don't belong in your head, either.

Seligman emphasized that your disputations must be believable. Mouthing unbelievable reassurances won't work. He says believability is based on four elements: evidence, alternatives, implications and usefulness.

Evidence is self-explanatory. If Artemis Author has a multi-book contract with a publisher other than the one who rejected his proposal, evidence is pretty darn strong to dispute his *I'm all washed up* lament.

Alternatives refers to explanations for the adversity other than your Belief. Artemis's might include that the publisher already had a book similar to his proposal in production, that the editor had a bad day, that this wasn't a good fit with that publishing program, that the editor has a screw loose.

Implications, in my mind is worst-case scenario. If your belief is correct, what then? Artemis looks at his life if he never sells again. Is that the end of his life? Will he starve? Will his family leave him? Will his mother disown him?

Usefulness means, as Seligman writes, that the consequences of a belief are more important than whether it's true. In Artemis's case, the consequence of believing he would never sell again could be freezing up and not being able to write - the old self-fulfilling fear. Artemis' belief is not useful.

After all that disputing, you should be ready for E-

Energization. Disputing should at least be putting a dent in those beliefs that followed after the adversity. Changing the beliefs should also change the consequences. Artemis' disputations have taken hold, especially the one about the rejected proposal not being a good fit with the publisher, and now he is feeling determined ... and energized enough to send the proposal to a more suitable publisher.

This process has brought Artemis from the pessimistic side to the optimistic side of the three Ps.

"Increased optimism, however attained, should translate into an increased ability to find positive meaning and experience positive emotions in daily life," writes Fredrickson. "Experiences of positive emotions, in turn, should broaden habitual modes of thinking and build personal resources for coping with life's adversity."

VANQUISHING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS WITH POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Courting positive emotions to fight negativity works because, Fredrickson says, "A person's thought-action repertoire cannot be simultaneously broad and narrow."

Fredrickson offers several strategies to court positive emotions:

- Relaxation therapies (meditation, yoga, progressive muscle relaxation and biofeedback) which Fredrickson also calls contentment therapies. Contentment, as a positive emotion, can undo the negative and broaden the thought processes.

- Behavioral therapies aimed at increasing rates of pleasant activities.

Studies have shown decreased levels of depression and even the apparent prevention of symptoms of depression. Pleasant activities produce positive emotions best when the individual feels s/he has control of the activity and if they share it with others.

- Cognitive therapies aimed at teaching optimistic explanatory styles, such as Seligman's to avoid depression.

But beyond that absence of a negative (depression), the goal is to bring the positive that Fredrickson and others hold provides physiological benefits (heart, immune system) and psychological benefits (resiliency, flexible thinking). That brings us to her final strategy:

- Coping strategies that find "positive meaning within and despite adversity."

Spiritual and religious beliefs are perhaps the most obvious way, but there are others. "(a) Reframing adverse events in a positive light (also called positive reappraisal); (b) infusing ordinary events with positive value; and (c) pursuing and attaining realistic goals." She cites studies that indicate "finding positive meaning outperforms engaging in pleasant activities as a predictor of depression remission and future psychological well-being."

Why would that be so? I would summarize the reasons by saying that finding positive meaning produces stronger positive emotions than do pleasant activities.

And here's an answer to a question that had been rolling around in my head from Susan Folkman, a Professor of Medicine at the University of California-San Francisco by way of Fredrickson quoting her: "Importantly, it appears that positive emotions 'may not need to be either intense or prolonged to produce a beneficial effect.' (Folkman, 1997, p. 1218)."

A fleeting or solitary instance of a positive emotion is not going to turn depression around on a dime. But multiple moments build on each other - remember the express lane for thoughts? It all seems to fit, doesn't it?

Finally, if you need more reason to try to change, findings were published in the February 2000 issue of the journal *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* that the difference between a moderately optimistic and a moderately pessimistic person amounted to about 12 years more of living for the optimist.