

'Accentuate the Positive, Eliminate the Negative'

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

"You've got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative." Remember that Johnny Mercer song? I have this memory of it being sung by an animated bear on TV. Maybe it was the bear's limited credibility that had me responding with a hearty, "Says who?"

Why eliminate the negative when it provided certain benefits - not the least of which is I can be a darned amusing depressed person. And I had high-power backing. At the August 2000 American Psychological Association (APA) meeting there was a panel called "The (Overlooked) Virtues of Negativity."

"Being (constantly) upbeat can lead to a tendency to think in a quick fix kind of way," says Julie Norem, a social psychologist at Wellesley College. Psychologist Barbara Held of Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine laments what she calls the "tyranny of the positive attitude." This camp points out that optimism run amok can lead to sloppy work and bad decision-making.

That panel could be viewed as backlash to a "Positive Psychology" movement that coalesced around University of Pennsylvania psychology professor Martin E.P. Seligman, who was elected president of the American Psychology Association in 1996.

That positive movement maintains that psychology has traditionally focused on disease and how to ameliorate it. Positive psychology aims to look at what works through scientific research. By examining the mechanisms of what works psychologically, they hope to shed light on what doesn't for those who are ill *and* to find ways to make things better for those who are not psychologically sick, but wouldn't mind a little tune-up.

These scientists (in contrast to so many in the scientific community who seem to spend an inordinate amount of time telling us what *not* to eat, wear or do) are looking into topics such as resiliency, hope, forgiveness and gratitude. I find that heartening.

Positive psychology was what I was after, though I didn't know the name for it when I started. From conversations with fellow writers, I suspect I've got lots of company. And what I've learned is that negativity and pessimism could be robbing us of writing time and possibly of good health, as well as diminishing our writing by narrowing our thoughts.

Last summer, long before I'd heard of positive psychology, I was facing a deadline when I received a review on a previous book with a phrase along the lines of "although the story loses some steam . . ." That same day, I had a piece of good news. You guessed it -- I focused on that solitary phrase in the review to the

exclusion of everything else, and hearing that phrase drumming through my head cost me an entire day of writing at a time I couldn't afford it.

After crying on some dear friends' shoulders, I looked at the review again the next day and realized that everything else in the review before and after that phrase was glowing. Yet I'd managed to not see that, instead zooming in on the negative. I'd been aware of this tendency before, but I'd figured it was part of the standard equipment in my writing personality (in most areas of my life I am not like this), and figured it ensured that I remained humble.

But this instance was different. First, I was embarrassed to admit to the friends with the damp shoulders that I'd jumped to the most negative conclusion possible. Second, I'd lost that entire day of writing - and it wasn't the first time this had happened. I'd had it. I was not going to let that habit interfere with my writing if I could help it. I wanted to know why we (not all writers, but a high percentage from my unscientific sampling) do this and--more important--how to stop.

First I brainstormed for reasons why we, as writers, might be inclined to open the door and let stuff such as a negative review or even a solitary negative phrase right into our heads, our hearts, our souls. I came up with a few theories, which I would be happy to share with that APA "The (Overlooked) Virtues of Negativity" panel:

- We don't want other people to think we have big heads

- We don't want to be blindsided by criticism so we make sure we know what all the potential slams are, and thus hope to be armored against them. (Doesn't work, but we hope.)

- It's a survival mechanism carried over from when doing something right was fine, but learning from your mistakes kept you alive another day. (Therefore evolution favored those who obsessed about their mistakes, and we're the descendents of all those fretters.)

- It's an analytical mechanism that -- if not taken to an extreme (Hah!) -- can help us improve our work. (My mind accepts this one, my hand reaches for chocolate.)

- It's a carryover from the last times we read our manuscript that's being criticized. The last -- what? -- three, four times we read it before it was published we were on the hunt for bad stuff because we were editing it, reading line-edits, reading galleys. So we've last viewed it with a mean critical eye, not looking for or noticing the good. Certainly not reading it as a reader. So if we hear something critical, it fits right in with our attitude toward the book, while the good stuff doesn't. This fits with scientific studies showing that people accept information that backs their opinion and reject information that doesn't.

All this could be true, and for some folks, knowing these are the reasons that trigger the "accentuate the negative" switch in our heads might stop the habit in its tracks. For those of you like me whose habits are made of sterner stuff, the journey continues.

Next, I read "positive energy" self-help books. This was not a good fit for me. I'm a fairly hard-headed skeptical type, so sending signals out to the universe that it answers in kind, while interesting, didn't sway me. (Programs that say "If you really believe in it, it will work" raise my skepticism, because they have a built-in excuse that it's never the program it's always the operator at fault. It didn't work? It's your fault for not believing.)

One interesting connection did result from this phase, however. What some call the Law of Attraction clicked in my head as coinciding with scientific research showing that people absorb information that confirms their beliefs and discard information that refutes their beliefs. We all know this at work in bigotry—seeing what confirms the bias, dismissing what doesn't. And that's basically what we're being to ourselves - bigots against optimism and hopefulness.

It was my first step up a mountain, which helped in two ways:

-- Consciousness. If I shrug off a good thing or wrap my arms around a bad thing I now recognize (eventually) that my reaction is because it's confirming beliefs I hold or fears I harbor.

-- A route to follow. Scientific research might be the jackhammer that could get through my hard head and break up that realm of negativity.

Then my sister-in-law sent me an excerpt from material aimed at business people that referred to brain research showing that the biological/chemical connections of a thought become faster and easier to make with repeated use. Scientists say the repetition stimulates dendritic growth in the brain. I say we're basically creating an express lane for those frequently-thought thoughts. Negative or positive, we're carving a rut in our brain that similar thoughts will roll through in nothing flat. New thoughts have to slog along laboriously building new connections.

Ah-ha! Now this was making sense to me. And maybe it explains the anecdotal success of people who swear by affirmations - they're getting their thoughts in a positive fast-track.

That excerpt had another section that addressed research done by Richard Davidson of the University of Wisconsin on the neurophysiology of positive and negative emotions. With many apologies to Davidson, the gist is that different areas of our brain hold the positive stuff (that's the technical term -- honest) and the negative stuff. You can stimulate one side or the other and get strong responses, as you might guess. But that's not all. When one side is anesthetized, the other side responds as if it had been stimulated. In other words, if the positive side is suppressed, even without stimulating the negative side, negative reactions such as crying, shouting, and acting out will occur.

So even if all something negative in our lives does is mildly suppress the positive side, that's going to bring out some of the negative.

That was another light bulb moment for me. It explained sinking into negative reactions even when there aren't big, horrible "bad things" - being nibbled by ducks suppresses the positive side enough to let the negative emotions pop up (and it that happens frequently, you start building that negative-thought express lane.) It also gave me a really good reason to eat chocolate, because it stimulates the positive side, bringing it back up to even from being suppressed, and that quiets down the negative side. (Sorry, I didn't find any research that confirms this, but it's such a good theory, it's got to be true.)

But I wanted to know more, and I still needed bigger weapons to throw against the negativity.

A writing friend suggested the book "Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your life" by Martin E.P. Seligman - yes, that's Dr. Positive Psychology himself, though I didn't know that when I read the book.

Much of the book is devoted to recapping series of studies that Seligman and colleagues have done since the mid-60s. Those studies first focused on what he calls "learned helplessness" - the sense that nothing you can do will have any effect, so you don't bother to try. Giving up.

They discovered some subjects, once trained to feel helpless (their efforts have no effect), do not try to help themselves even when their efforts would have an effect - they don't even check if their efforts could help. Yet others, exposed to the same circumstances, never give up.

So what was the difference between these two kinds of people?

Seligman's answer, based on further studies, is that explanatory style is the difference: what you say to yourself when things are going bad.

He breaks explanatory style into three elements - permanence, pervasiveness and personalization -- each with a spectrum between an optimistic response and a pessimistic response.

Permanence - is what went wrong temporary or enduring?

Pervasiveness - is what went wrong limited to one specific element or across the board?

Personalization - is what went wrong solely your fault or are its causes outside of you?

Say a high school student fails a test. How does he respond?

I will never amount to anything hits the three Ps from a pessimistic style.

Never is permanent, *anything* is pervasive and *I*, of course, is personal.

The teacher put questions on that test we hadn't covered yet hits the three Ps from an optimistic style. *Hadn't covered/yet* are temporary. *That test* is specific to one event. *The teacher* puts the onus outside the student. (I was grumbling about personal responsibility as I read this, then turned the page and there was a section headed "Caveat About Responsibility." In short, Seligman says he does not recommend a wholesale blaming of external elements. However, awareness of a habit of taking on responsibility when it is not yours is advised.)

Seligman demonstrates links among the pessimistic explanatory style and helplessness and depression - and the optimistic explanatory style with persistence and, often, with success. If you line up your explanatory style with optimism, will all be sweetness and light? Probably not if the raw material you're working with is not optimistic; Psychologists suggest people have a set range for optimism that can be maximized, but not necessarily made over.

But adjusting your explanatory style likely will produce a better balance. Runaway optimism might not be the best mode, either. (Seligman has noted in interviews that there are some professions where optimists might not be the best choice. Pilots, for instance. "Turn back? Heck, no. I can get this plane over that mountain range with one engine and no fuel - piece of cake." *Not* the person you want in the cockpit.)

Moreover, Max More, yet another Ph.D., weighing in on this, proposes that optimists can be divided into two groups: passive and dynamic. Passive says everything will be okay, and sits back and waits for that to come true. Dynamic says I can fix this, and sets to work doing that. Explanatory style is not enough on its own - you have to act, too.

But what if your explanatory style is just fine or negativity doesn't stop your writing in its tracks - what is in all this positive psychology for you?

In a talk describing a study underway on the benefits of “positive affect” Ed Diener, one of the studiers, said that people in a positive mood do better in creativity measures. Further, in referring to “eminent creative people” 60 percent of their creativity seems to occur while in a positive mood, and 8 percent in a negative mood.

Now, some of us skeptical types might be wondering if the good mood is a result of having a good creative session, rather than the cause, but the Ph.D.s have some thoughts on that, too.

Barbara Fredrickson of the University of Michigan has an answer for that in her research, and especially in her 2000 article “Cultivating Positive Emotions to Optimize Health and Well-Being.” (Trust me - that’s a sexy title in the world of the APA.)

Fredrickson writes that negative emotions (anger, fear, sadness, anxiety, etc.) narrow our thoughts in order to prepare us for specific actions, such as the old fight-or-flight. As Diener points out, unpleasant emotions can signal something is wrong and push you to make changes. It’s useful for life-threatening situations, where you want all your resources - mental and physical -- zeroed in on the action that’s going to get you out of that fix. The zeroing-in effect of those negative emotions, however, means they are not willing to share your resources with other thoughts or actions - the sort of thoughts and actions that you need for writing fiction, like imagination.

So, how do you shake those negative emotions that creep in when you read, oh, say a negative phrase in a review?

Experiments have shown that positive emotions (for example contentment, interest, joy) can undo the cardiovascular effects of negative reactions (fear and sadness.) Fredrickson and colleagues measured the cardiovascular effects of telling subjects they had to give a speech to induce “negative emotional arousal.” Then, after saying “just kidding” about the speech to remove the negative emotional arousal, they divided them into groups and showed some negative films (scary, sad), some positive films, and some neutral films. The group shown the positive films had the fastest cardiovascular recovery.

Fredrickson then says, “Beyond speeding physiological recovery, the hypothesized undoing effect implies that positive emotions should counteract any aspect of negative emotions.” Any aspect? Like narrowed thinking? Like frozen creativity?

Alas, experiments to confirm that implication have not yet been done - or at least not yet reported, this area of research is ongoing -- although Fredrickson notes that “indirect supportive evidence can be drawn from a collection of correlational studies. Individuals who express or report higher levels of positive emotion show more constructive and flexible coping, more abstract and long-term thinking, and greater emotional distance following stressful negative events.” (For those wanting to dig deeper, she cites Keltner & Bonanno, 1997; Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998; Martin, Kuiper, Olinger, & Dance, 1993; Stein, Folkman, Trabasso, & Richards, 1997).

[For a different take read Kevin Rathunde of the University of Utah, who wrote an article called “Broadening and Narrowing in the Creative Process: A Commentary on Fredrickson’s ‘Broaden-and-Build’ Model.” He called for a more complex model than “negative” emotions on one side and

“positive” emotions on the other. He also held that creativity requires the narrowing thinking (focused, analytical) as well as broadening thinking. “A large and growing amount of research suggests that the right hemisphere operates in a primary process manner, whereas the left hemisphere operates in a sequential and analytic way,” he writes. “Creativity requires both kinds of processing; therefore, it is related to flexible communication across the hemispheres and the ability to integrate these different ways of processing information (Bogen, 1969; Martindale, 1999).”]

I’m not arguing with Rathunde, but I feel that I have the negative side down - forgive the pun - pat.

So pending the positive psychologists running some studies on authors, what’s in Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build model of positive emotions for writers?

I’ll let her words answer that: “Cultivated positive emotions not only counteract negative emotions, but also broaden individuals’ habitual modes of thinking and build their personal resources for coping.”

Broadening habitual ways of thinking (sounds a lot like creativity, doesn’t it?) and becoming better at coping (sure seems like a handy tool in the world of publishing). I like it.

Building on the work of her fellow psychologists, Fredrickson argues that while negative actions narrow thoughts in order to facilitate an act, positive emotions, with their broadening effect provide the platform for building new skills. For example, she says that interest sparks us to explore, which builds our store of knowledge. And contentment “involves full awareness of, and openness to momentary experiences; it carries the urge to savor and integrate those experiences, which in turn creates a new sense of self and a new world view.” Good stuff for a writer.

And what is built by a positive emotion endures long past the instance of experiencing the emotion.

Fredrickson is not alone. Alice Isen of Cornell University is researching the effects of positive emotions and she indicates that positive effect appears to make people more flexible and more successful at tasks requiring creativity and flexible thought.

Think of negative emotions as the sugar fueling the short-term gratification of action, while positive emotions are the protein creating the muscle of long-term gratification of expanded abilities.

Over the past eight months I’ve read a lot, and practiced a lot, and I have become more positive. Do I qualify as little Mary Sunshine? Uh, no. A healthy dose of skepticism is beneficial in my opinion. But I have become more of what Seligman refers to as a situational optimist - even in situations where I would have previously been a knee-jerk pessimist.

I’m trying to tame my negative emotions sweet tooth so that Fredrickson’s expectation will take hold: “Positive emotions, the broaden-and-build model holds, open people’s mindsets, enabling creative and flexible thinking.”

The only downside is that I had some really good lines about being blue that are now going to waste. Or maybe I could have this pessimistic character who is a really amusing depressed person...

How’s that for flexible thinking?