

# The Power of Positive Thinking

*"There is more than one meaning to the same reality." Joel Goodman*

In Scott Peck's book, The Road Less Traveled he writes, "Life can be difficult." Most of us are experiencing some level of difficulty during an ever changing economic crisis. How we perceive our challenges will determine how well we manage life stressors.

Studies indicate that those who are able to maintain a positive attitude toward hardships and change, live longer and retain youthfulness both physically and mentally. People who are optimistic have a higher quality of life and will live 19% longer than those who are pessimistic. Research has also shown there is a strong link between negative thinking and stress which can lead to being more susceptible to coronary artery disease, catching the common cold and even lung diseases, such as emphysema. In fact, stress is the most common ill health in our society and constitutes 75% to 90% of visits to a family physician.

Dr. Ester Sternberg, director of the Integrative Neural Immune Program at the National Institute of Mental Health, says, "The objective should be not to get rid of stress completely because you can't get rid of stress; Stress is Life, Life is Stress. Rather, you need to be able to use your stress response optimally."

Stressors can be classified in two general groups: External and Internal.

**External Stressors** are caused by life events in which we can not control, such as loss of a beloved family member, aging and changes in our economic situation.

**Internal Stressors** are self-generated based on negative self-talk which influences how we think and respond to external stress. Negative self-talk is a stream of thoughts based on misconceptions, lack of current reality and distorted ideas which overpower our ability for logic and reason. Negative self-talk often originates from our earliest experiences and perceptions that we adopt as truth and then transfer to current situations. Some common forms of negative and irrational self-talk include:

- Filtering the positive aspects of life by magnifying the negative. For example, I am not able to run anymore because of numerous injuries. Rather than focus on everything I can do, I obsess about not being able to run every day.
- Personalizing something bad that has occurred and automatically thinking it is about something you did. For example, your friend may be in a bad mood and you assume it is because she/he does not like you anymore.
- Catastrophizing by automatically anticipating the worst outcome. For example, many of us listen to the stock market and fear we will soon have to stand in food lines!
- Polarizing by perceiving everything as good or bad. This way of thinking limits our options. For example, if you think you can not obtain perfection then you define yourself as a total failure.

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I believe the most effective strategy to deal with life stressors is a technique called Cognitive Restructuring. The theory behind Cognitive Restructuring is that it is not necessarily the life event that causes our stress, but the way we think about it. I have had the opportunity to help people recover from tragic events in their life. I notice that those who are able to identify the legitimacy of their feelings and channel their emotions in a way that avoids negative thinking tend to heal much more quickly.

I have been particularly inspired by someone who recently lost her spouse of 46 years. His death was unexpected and she had to face her life being turned upside down when she walked into their home to discover he had died.

Losing a spouse is rated the highest life event stressor. While accepting the tragic situation she allowed herself to experience all of her emotions. At the same time she continued reframing the situation as an opportunity to make positive changes. She was also able to avoid thinking of herself as a victim and instead recognized her positive character attributes to begin to redefine her identity and life purpose.

The following are suggestions to practice cognitive restructuring and to begin to change negative thinking:

- Write down the external stressors.
- Identify the emotions you felt in the situation.
- Write down the negative automatic thought.
- Identify the evidence based on current reality that either supports or negates the thought.
- Reframe the thought in a way that allows for a positive action toward eliminating or managing the external stress. For example, "what advice would you give someone else in the same situation?"

Remember that reframing automatic negative thoughts takes Time and Practice. It is like learning a new language.

I suggest people practice repeating the positive message by taking their age, multiplying it by ten and then repeating the message that number of times per day. For example, if you are 40, you will need to repeat the positive message 400 times per day.