Positive Thinking: Be Kind to Yourself

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

In fact, some studies show that personality traits – optimism and pessimism – can affect how well you live and even how long you live. Positive thinking is a key part of an effective stress management strategy.

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
- Better coping skills during hardships

It is 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 reduce the harmful health effects of stress on your body.

Negative Self-Talk

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 self-talk include:

Filtering: You magnify the negative aspects of a situation and filter out all of the positive ones. For example, you received a strong grade on a quiz, but instead of focusing on the good grade, you spend the evening criticizing yourself for not getting a perfect score.
Personalizing: When something bad occurs, you automatically blame yourself. For example, an evening out with friends gets canceled—you assume that the change in plans is because no one wanted to be around you.

Catastrophizing: You automatically anticipate the worst. You think one awkward interaction with a professor will mean the end of your academic career.

Polarizing: You see things only as good or bad, black or white—there is no gray area. Anything short of perfection means total failure.

You Can Learn Positive Thinking

Instead of giving in to these kinds of negative self-talk, weed out misperceptions 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:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Negative self talk</strong></th>
<th><strong>Positive spin</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’m not smart enough to be here at Cal.</td>
<td>I deserve to be here. I have a long history of being a strong student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My advisor hates me.</td>
<td>I’ll find a way to work well with my advisor.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I’m never going to get better at this class.</td>
<td>I’ll continue to do my best, and if I need to, I’ll get some extra help.</td>
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<tr>
<td>No one wants to go out with me.</td>
<td>I’m a good, interesting person. I’m grateful for the friends in my life</td>
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**Practice 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.

Adapted from Mayo Clinic.com (May 31. 2007)