

Personal Excellence

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MORE THAN
SIMPLY WISHFUL
THINKING**

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Joychiever



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Optimism Is More Than Simply Wishful Thinking

4 reasons for turning that frown upside down

By Tracy LaLonde

The smiley emoji is ubiquitous in today's society. Yet 264 million people worldwide live with depression¹ and 17.3 million US adults age 18 or older experienced at least one major depressive episode in 2017.² And this was before Covid-19. A CDC study tells us that during late June 2020, 40% of US adults reported struggling with mental health or substance use.³ It's been a tough year, to say the least.



"Pessimism leads to weakness, optimism to power."

- William James, Father of American Psychology



How can you leverage optimism and positivity, not only during a difficult period in history, but also as enduring behavior? Optimism, hopefulness or confidence about the future, and positivity, the ability to see the good, are powerful tools in the arsenal of human survival.

1. Positivity Is a Choice

The brain receives 11 million bits of information every second from your senses. Yet it can only process 40 bits a second.⁴ Your brain must make split-second choices about which pieces to either take in and interpret or ignore and dismiss. Therefore, your reality

is a CHOICE. What you choose to focus on shapes your perceptions and your capability for positivity.

Yet, the challenge we have as humans is that our brains have evolved over time to have a negativity bias—the tendency to notice and pay attention to negative stimuli more often than positive stimuli. To survive in the wild, we had to constantly be on the lookout for threats from animals and other humans. Our radars were always tuned to danger so that we could respond and react quickly.

The good news is that our brains are able to rewire themselves, literally. It's called neuroplasticity and is the brain's amazing capacity to change, adapt, and create a different biochemical state. If more of the 40 bits of information is focused on the positive, rather than the negative, it can have an overwhelming impact. Much like any other muscle, you can train your brain towards joy.

2. Positivity ≠ Pollyanna

Choosing to focus on the positive, however, does not automatically make you a Pollyanna. Pollyanna gets a bad name because it can be perceived to be blindly optimistic—only seeing the good and never seeing the bad. Optimism isn't a denial of reality when it is balanced with realism.

We all encounter negative experiences, situations, or emotions. What is important is how you handle those moments so as to lean towards positivity rather than getting stuck in the negativity. Honor and embrace your sadness, fear, anger, or disappointment.



Acknowledge your feelings and let them pass through. They won't last long if you allow yourself to feel them fully, to discharge the energy they hold. Once you release this energy, you can move back towards the positive side.

The goal is to increase the percentage of the 40 bits that are positive while not sticking your head in the sand to avoid what's happening around you.

3. Positivity Improves Health

With optimism and positivity, your body is awash with dopamine (the pleasure and reward neurotransmitter), serotonin (the mood stabilizer), and endorphins (the pain relievers and pleasure boosters).

Additionally, your prefrontal cortex (the executive function) has a good handle over your amygdala (the flight-or-flight and emotional reaction trigger).

When you feel happy, you carry yourself differently. You have a spring in your step, smile easily, interact with others in a friendly way, have more patience, and are more open to new experiences. Additionally, optimism and positivity create a long list of benefits in the body:

- Lower blood pressure
- Fewer colds
- Better sleep
- Achievement of more goals
- Less pain
- Lower disease risks
- Better stress management
- Ability to overcome obstacles more easily

A meta-analysis of 35 studies⁵ concludes that happy people can live up to 18% longer than their less happy peers. With the current average life expectancy in the US being approximately 72, joy could potentially add 13 years to your life.



4. Positivity Is Good for Business

Numerous studies show that happiness creates higher levels of productivity, higher sales, better leaders, higher performance ratings, and higher pay.⁶ In fact, studies show that higher income is more directly related to one's level of happiness than to one's level of education.⁷ Happy workers are also more loyal to the company, take fewer sick days, have fewer conflicts with coworkers, quit their jobs less frequently, and generate greater customer satisfaction.

How do your processes and practices create a positive and happy culture at work? One area in which you can make an impact is to help managers to engage in more employee acknowledgment. Recent research suggests that over 65% of employees don't feel recognized at work. Yet, recognition can tap into employees' desires for connection, belong and esteem, which all can boost happiness. Train your managers to notice and comment on small improvements, successes and good performance and watch your workforce create a major impact on your bottom line.

The power of optimism and positivity is impactful. Begin with yourself to find joy in life—meditate, exercise and express gratitude. Then try to help others—engage in kindness and affirm their worth. And see what can happen!

Notes

- ¹ Ritchie, H., & Roser, M. (2018, January 20). *Mental Health*. Retrieved October 18, 2020, from <https://ourworldindata.org/mental-health>
- ² *Major Depression*. (n.d.). Retrieved October 18, 2020, from <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression.shtml>
- ³ Czeisler ME, Lane RI, Petrosky E, et al. *Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States, June 24-30, 2020*. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020;69:-1057. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1>
- ⁴ Achor, Shawn. *Before Happiness: The 5 Hidden Keys to Achieving Success, Spreading Happiness, and Sustaining Positive Change*. New York: Crown Business, 2013.
- ⁵ Petre, Alina. "13 Habits Linked to a Long Life (Backed by Science)." *Healthline*. April 8, 2019. Accessed March 2, 2020. <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/13-habits-linked-to-a-long-life>.
- ⁶ Achor, Shawn. *The Happiness Advantage: How a Positive Brain Fuels Success in Work and Life*. New York: Currency, 2018.
- ⁷ Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho and Howard C. Cutler. *The Art of Happiness: 10th Anniversary Gift Edition*. Sydney, N.S.W.: Hachette Australia, 2009.



Tracy LaLonde is an overachiever, business development coach, and professional speaker. After 20 years in the legal industry—a field with extreme rates of burnout—she witnessed her successful peers deal with high levels of anxiety, worry, and stress. At the peak of her career, Tracy stepped away from her business to embark on her own Joy Journey. Tracy founded Joychiever to help other overachievers define their unique joy journey and apply their ambition to achieve a balanced, happy life. She is the author of *The Joychiever Journey: Evade Burnout, Surpass Your Goals and Out-Happy Everyone*.



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