

The Truth about Positivity

We hear all the time that we need to reframe our self-talk and cultivate positivity, which sounds promising on the surface. After all, who wouldn't want to bask in good thoughts and have everything magically work out for them? The problem is that by itself, positive thinking isn't very effective and can even be detrimental.

There's nothing inherently wrong with being optimistic and trying to "look on the bright side." But positivity as an approach operates at the *surface level* of conscious thought and does nothing to contend with the subconscious mind, where negative self-talk and limiting beliefs really live. If you've tried thinking positively, you know that it can be a difficult habit to maintain. You may spend five, ten or even twenty minutes reciting an affirmation, but what about the rest of the day? Chances are that your mind drifts back to old, repetitive thoughts that have burned deep grooves into your brain. It goes without saying that if you command yourself to think "I am abundant and amazing," yet your deeply held core belief is that you are never enough or unworthy of your success, your brain will be quick to incite an inner war.

Healthy positivity becomes toxic when it denies, minimizes or invalidates a person's emotions. You begin to start feeling bad about feeling bad, which can trigger a self-defeating spiral. It's natural and healthy to experience a range of feelings, including less pleasant ones like disappointment, sadness or guilt. While there's no question that dwelling on 'negative' emotions is unhelpful, whitewashing your insecurities with positive thinking is only a temporary fix.

How to Maximize the Benefits of Positivity

Here are some strategies for reframing your self-talk in a way that works for you instead of against you:

1. Practice Acceptance

The first step is to articulate and acknowledge any thoughts and feelings weighing you down, instead of trying to ignore them. Telling yourself to "get over it" or "quit stressing" can make things worse. It's easier to let go of unwanted thoughts and feelings if you're able to just sit with them for a little while, noticing and naming them without judgement. Then you can use tactics like visualization to help you release the negativity. For example, imagine in your mind's eye that your unwanted thoughts and feelings are balloons in the sky or leaves in a stream floating away from you.

2. Practice Self-Compassion

Self-deprecating talk can be incredibly draining. Instead, use compassionate statements like "it's okay for me to be angry" or "I forgive myself for making a mistake" to free up emotional resources. When you spend less time beating yourself up for procrastinating, for example, you can redirect that energy into breaking down a project into manageable tasks and actually tackling your to-do list.

3. Practice Self-Inquiry

Research shows that asking ourselves questions rather than issuing commands is a much more effective way to create change. So when you catch your inner critic flinging accusations, try greeting it with curiosity as opposed to fear. Turning negative statements into questions opens the door for exploration and possibility. Consider the following examples:

- When have I successfully done this before?
- What if [*insert worst-case scenario*] happens? How would I handle it?
- How might I approach ___ if I was my most confident self?

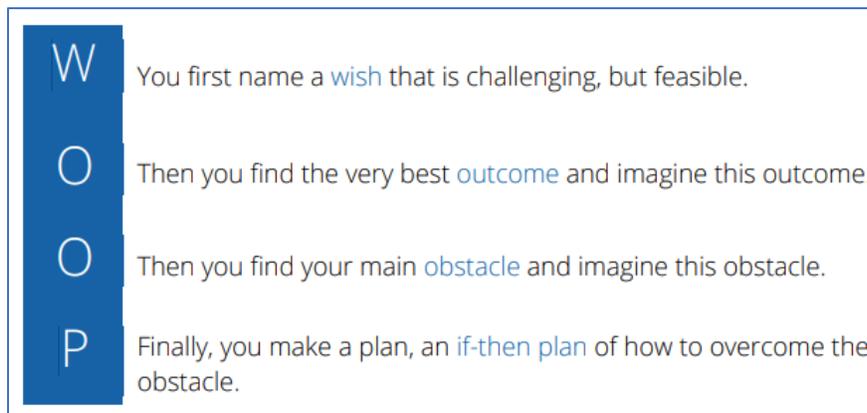
This type of interrogative self-talk is much more conducive to a positive mindset because it powers up the brain's problem-solving areas and helps you tap into your innate creativity.

4. **Focus on Progress, Not Perfection**

Reciting positive affirmations like “I’m wonderful and powerful” may backfire if you don’t *truly, deeply* believe them. What’s more constructive is to concentrate on who you are *becoming*, on the journey rather than the destination. Try re-working your self-talk to sound more like “I’m a work in progress and that’s okay” or “every moment, I’m making an effort to be more conscious about how I react to situations”. These kinds of affirmations point you in the direction of positive growth – they acknowledge that you have a choice in creating a better future for yourself and that you are evolving.

5. **Be Practical**

If you’re hoping to get what you want or solve your problems by simply willing yourself into a positive mindset, you’re setting yourself up for disappointment. It’s important to manage your expectations, to be realistic and accountable in how you go about re-framing your self-talk. Integrating goal-setting and action-planning strategies into the process can significantly increase your chances of success. Try this 4-step, scientifically proven method developed by psychologist Dr. Gabriele Oettingen:



Adapted from:

- **Melody Wilding** (<https://melodywilding.com/positive-thinking-doesnt-work/#:~:text=The%20problem%20with%20positive%20thinking%20as%20an%20approach>)
- **Arundhati Chatterjee** (<https://thetransformationallab.com/why-only-positive-thinking-doesnt-work-5-things-to-do-instead/>)
- **woopmylife.org**