Practising Positivity

1st July 2020

The modern study of neuroplasticity has shown that how we think and behave can actually alter the structure of the brain. Positivity—positive thinking—can rewire the brain. By practising positivity, we can train ourselves to be happier and more resilient overall. This article offers practical strategies on how to break negative thought patterns and practise positivity.

Neuroplasticity

The brain was once thought of as static, meaning once the brain was formed, you couldn't change it. The good news, scientists have discovered, is that the brain is not unchangeable. In fact, we change our brains every day without even realising it. Every habit you practice, each skill you learn, causes your brain to strengthen certain connections and weaken others. Our environment, habits, emotions, behaviour, and thoughts all have an impact on our brain.

Neuroplasticity makes the brain resilient because our brains learn, adapt, and grow based on our actions and experiences. The brain's neuroplasticity is what makes all permanent learning possible—for example, when you learn to play a musical instrument or speak a foreign language. It's also how we overcome and recover from medical issues such as a stroke or other brain injury, depression, and many other illnesses.

Being able to change our brains in positive ways—to learn, to recover and heal—is a wonderful thing. However, on the flip side, our brains are also vulnerable to our external environment and even internal influences. This means that in the same way that we can heal, grow, and improve our brains and thoughts, we can also injure our brains and stay stuck in negative thoughts and behaviour.

What negative thinking and worry do to the brain

As humans, we naturally focus on the negative—we are hardwired that way to keep ourselves safe from threats. In fact, when confronted with negativity or a potential threat, our brains activate more intensely than they do when an equally intense good or positive situation presents itself.

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Interestingly, even just *thinking* about negativity activates the same parts in the brain as a real active threat to our safety or well-being. And while a negative thought or situation can "stick" in our brains after a split second, it takes 10 or more seconds of focusing on a positive thought for our brain to translate that positivity from our active memory to short-term memory and eventually to long-term memory.

There are also physical, emotional, and behavioural symptoms typically associated with negative thinking and worry:

Physical symptoms

- muscle tension and muscle pain
- headaches
- digestive problems
- chest pain
- reduced libido or sex drive
- sleep problems
- fatigue

Emotional symptoms

- anxiety
- mood changes
- restlessness
- irritability and anger
- depression or sadness
- lack of focus or motivation

Behavioural symptoms

- changes in appetite (either over- or undereating)
- abuse of alcohol and/or drugs
- social withdrawal

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- outbursts of anger
- tobacco/nicotine use

Although it's necessary for our brains to let us know when we are in danger or there is a threat, we need to be careful not to let negative thoughts take over our lives. The more our thought patterns tend to be negative, the easier it becomes to return to these automatic negative thought patterns. In fact, rumination (constantly turning over a situation in one's mind and focusing on its negative aspects) can damage structures and connections in the brain that regulate emotions, memory, and feelings. As we focus more on the negative, over time, it becomes more difficult to create positive memories.

The benefits of positive thinking

Not only is positive thinking a helpful way to reduce automatic negative reactions, but there are also many physical and emotional health benefits associated with thinking positively.

The physical health benefits of positive thinking can help:

- boost your immune system
- improve heart health
- reduce or prevent hypertension
- lower stress levels
- boost resilience

As you increase your positive thinking, you'll feel healthier in general, which can empower and motivate you to increase your healthy habits.

The emotional health benefits of positive thinking can help you:

- handle problems more effectively
- enjoy your life more
- develop positive habits
- boost your self-esteem

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- form healthy, positive relationships more easily (It's easier to see the good in others when you're looking at your world through a positive lens.)

How to change negative thoughts and think more positively

For individuals struggling with depression, the following tips won't necessarily substitute for professional treatment, but they can work when done together with therapy and/or medication to help you feel better.

Engage in an activity that fully occupies the mind, such as doing a crossword puzzle. This can be helpful in breaking out of ruminative thought patterns.

Practice mindfulness or meditation. Focusing on the here and now and being present is a valuable way to change negative thought patterns and brain activity. Meditating regularly can help shift negative thought patterns, help the brain focus, and even slow the loss of brain cells. These apps can help you get started with meditating: Buddhify, Calm, Headspace, The Mindfulness App, and Sattva.

Practice Yoga. Like meditation, yoga helps make you more aware of your own self-talk. Being aware of negative self-talk prompts you to make a change.

Consciously replace your thoughts. Make it a point to change your negative thinking by replacing a negative thought with a positive one.

Smile. It has been proven to improve your mood and thought patterns. Smiling sends positive thoughts to the brain.

Sing. Singing has been scientifically proven to fight depression and boost one's mood.

Make a list of things you're worried or stressed about to get your worries out of your head. Then make another list of things you feel positive or grateful for. Next, make an effort to shift the focus of your brain from negative to positive thoughts.

Write in a gratitude journal. Keeping one can help increase psychological well-being.

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Read something positive. Doing so can boost your mood and give you a mental break.

Be around positive thinkers. Your attitude will tend to follow that of your friends.

Help someone else solve a problem. Take a break from thinking about yourself and do what you can to help someone else. It will help bring a sense of accomplishment and can help you gain a new perspective on your own problems.

Take control of your life. Make choices to change what you can control.

It's tough to start, but as you work at it and intentionally take steps to improve yourself, you'll build stronger connections between positive thinking and challenges, and you'll be on your way to a more positive outlook.

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