

Counter the Psychology of Pessimism

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We all do it. We get a stellar performance review at work but there is one area our boss says “needs a little improvement.” What do we focus on? The mildly negative comment. Our partner tells us that we are oh so wonderful that it’s impossible to count the ways — but ... Ouch! The “but” obliterates the compliments.

We watch an almost-perfect game on TV or from the stands. Yes, we’re impressed by the skills and perseverance of our favorite team. We’re excited and pumped by the win. But why oh why didn’t they... ? Your child brings home a report card with four As and one B. It’s a rare parent indeed who can resist asking “Why the B?”

It’s called the “negativity bias.” It’s the tendency to put more attention, value and weight on negative comments and experience than on the positive. It’s human. We seem to be hardwired to do it. Some theorists suggest that our survival depended on it when we were living in primitive times. People who didn’t stay alert for saber-toothed tigers probably didn’t get to see another day. Those who missed out on a positive opportunity got to try again tomorrow.

But the tendency to focus on problems didn’t end when we got out of the caves. In a recent article in *Cato’s Letter*, Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker names it the psychology of pessimism. For a number of reasons, he says, people hang on to bad news and minimize the good. Partly, it comes from our ancient experience in the caves. Partly it’s because there are so many more ways that things can go wrong than they can go right. Partly it’s a function of nostalgia. (We all like to think that there was a time when life was simpler and easier.) And partly it’s because what we’ve come to call “news” is almost always about bad things. As Pinker points out, it’s news when a high school shooting occurs. It’s not considered news that thousands of schools went through an ordinary day.

There are reasons to be pessimistic all around us. But it doesn’t serve us well. Pessimism discourages people from taking action. It saps creativity. It leads us down a road to depression. It separates us from others. This is not to say that we should blind ourselves to problems. But focusing on them to the exclusion of celebrating the right and good and positive gets in the way of being the best we can be.

Here are five ways to counter the psychology of pessimism:

1. **Highlight the positives in your life.**

Positive psychologists urge us to take time each day to review the things that went right or what we are grateful for. They suggest we keep a journal. Simply take a few minutes each day to write down the positives in your life. They don’t have to be huge achievements. They can be as simple as gratitude for having running water or for having milk in the house for your morning coffee. They can be appreciation for the fact that everyone in your family is safe today; that someone loves you most in all the world; or that you have a job.

When we take only a few minutes of every day to acknowledge what is going right, we help ourselves manage the times when they go wrong.

2. Keep things in perspective.

A disagreement doesn't have to become the reason to end a relationship. Disagreements can usually be solved. A mistake at school or at work doesn't have to be reason to give up. Most mistakes can be acknowledged, corrected and learned from.

Slipping from a resolve or recovery (whether from a fitness program or addiction) doesn't make you a terrible person. Take a deep breath and start again. As long as we're alive, we can do something about setbacks and work on the things we find challenging.

3. Do those random acts of kindness.

Don't let the saying be only a bumper sticker phrase. Do it. Be on the lookout every day for ways you can make the world a little bit better for someone else. Give the homeless guy a buck. Shovel the walk of the elderly couple down the street. Tip the store clerk who went out of her way to be helpful. Bring chocolate to the office when you know that people need a little lift.

4. Contribute to a culture of positivity.

Look for reasons to encourage people, to acknowledge helpfulness and to catch people being good and worthy and right. Thank the bagger who puts your eggs at the top of the bag instead of under the potatoes. Ask the online associate to transfer you to her supervisor so you can report how helpful she's been. Thank your partner and kids whenever they are cooperative and supportive of each other. Freely hand out compliments to those around you.

5. Hang out with optimistic people.

The company we keep matters. It's human to want to fit in. If we hang out with people who always find the cloud around a silver lining, our natural tendency is to do the same. If we look for people who are cheerful doers, it's likely that we will soak in the positivity and see reasons to be cheerful, too.

I've heard it said that people who are optimistic aren't paying attention. I counter that to really pay attention means to remember that every day millions of people do millions of things that are ordinary and good and that give them joy.

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