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Staying Positive in Tough Times

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Sometimes it can be annoying to be told "stay positive" when it feels like nothing is going right. Let's face it, times are pretty tough now; tougher than normal. The tougher the challenge, the more this glass-half-full wisdom can come across as unrealistic. It's hard to find the motivation to focus on positives when positivity seems like nothing more than wishful thinking.

One of the primary obstacle to staying positive is the natural "fight or flight" response as explained in [this Harvard Medical School article](#). Our brains see a threat and survival instincts kick in. These are the same instincts that have served humankind since the age of hunters and gatherers who lived with the very real threat of being killed by animals or other things in their environment.

Whilst that was a long time ago this part of human nature breeds pessimism and negativity as our mind's tend to wander with the [amygdala](#) interpreting images and sounds and when it perceives danger it instantly sends a distress signal to the hypothalamus. These distress signals magnify the perception things are not going well. This is, of course, a great help when you are in a dangerous situation however when the threat is imagined or exaggerated this in-built reaction can skew the reality of the situation and make your life difficult.

Staying positive is a daily challenge that requires focus. Maintaining positivity requires constant focus and attention. We often hear the phrase "mind over matter" which is more than just a phrase. As detailed in the [SBS show "Secrets of the Human Body"](#) the brain is a powerful organ which can seemingly take over the entire body if the mind is left to wander. The show quoted neuroscientists and psychologists who have incorporated mindfulness meditation into their clinical practices. The advice is that you must be intentional about staying positive if you're going to overcome the brain's tendency to focus on threats.

The Impact of Positivity on your Health

Negative feelings are not good for your health. Numerous studies have shown that optimism has a positive impact on physical health; as detailed in this [Harvard Medical School article](#).

Globally recognised psychologist Professor Martin Seligman is considered the "father of Positive Psychology" and leads the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Centre. He has conducted extensive research on how levels of pessimism or optimism influence people's overall health. The research found that pessimists' health deteriorated far more rapidly as they aged. For more details you may like to [watch Professor Seligman on this ABC program called "All In The Mind"](#).

[The Mayo Clinic](#) has conducted research which supports Professor Seligman's findings. In their research they found optimists have lower levels of cardiovascular disease and longer life-spans. Part of the research examined the physiological aspects of not being optimistic can be measured. There is an association between pessimism and inflammatory markers in the body with inflammation increasing the risk of heart disease.

[Researchers from the University of Kentucky](#) examined the impact of optimism on immunity by injecting optimists and pessimists with a virus to measure their immune response. The researchers found optimists had a much stronger immune response than pessimists.



Positivity and Performance

Professor Seligman has also studied the connection between positivity and performance and found optimistic salespeople sold 37% more insurance policies than pessimists who were twice as likely to leave the company during their first year of employment. In his [recent article "What is Positive Psychology and Why is It Important?"](#) he provides an a detailed summary of his work including the new theory of well-being: PERMA which stands for:

- Positive Emotions
- Engagement
- Positive Relationships
- Meaning
- Accomplishment

Whilst Professor Seligman is not alone in his theories he has studied positivity more than anyone, and lives by the belief, which is backed by research, that each of us has the ability to turn pessimistic thoughts and tendencies around with simple effort and know-how. In fact this research shows we can all transform to shift the inherent tendency of pessimism to positive thinking through simple techniques.

The research and suggestions are extensive but to narrow the focus we have reduced the list to three key actions you can take to stay positive in the tough times we are currently faced with.



1. Separate Truth from Fiction

The first step in creating a net positive outlook is knowing how to stop negative self-talk in its tracks. The more you stew on negative thoughts, the more power you give them. Most of our negative thoughts are just that — thoughts, not the truth, not fact.

It is very easy to let a negative inner voice take over and it is this which often results in us believing the negative thoughts are reality. When this occurs you should pause and write them down - literally write them down immediately. Breaking the cycle your brain has started is important and the action of stopping what you are doing and writing down the negative thoughts slow the momentum of your thoughts. Taking that pause allows you to be more clear-headed and rational in evaluating the you will be more rational and clear-headed in evaluating their truthfulness and fact base. The words you have used can also be very insightful.

When you see words like 'always', 'never' and 'worst' they should be a red flag. Do you really *always* lose your wallet? Of course not. Perhaps you forget it frequently, but most of the time you can find it straight way. Are you *never* going to find a solution to your problem or is it that you have just been resisting asking someone for help? No doubt there will be times when you find the statement you have written is true. When this happens, rather than stew on the negativity, take the problem to a colleague or friend you trust to seek their view. This will help you determine what is truth and what is fiction.

When you hear yourself saying things like "this always happens" you should pause as it is likely driven by your brain's inherent fight or flight reaction; the natural threat response which is inflating the perceived frequency or severity. In that pause you need to learn to identify what is happening are thoughts which need to be assessed to decide if they are truth and reality. This process will assist you to stop the cycle of negative thoughts and move towards net positivity.

2. Find the Positive

After taking pause to identify truth rather than fiction you need to help your brain learn what you want it to focus on so it does not continue to try to default to negativity.

As with breaking any habit, once achieved it become your new habit; the way you do things. As detailed in [this Time article](#) this will come naturally after some practice, but first you have to give your wandering brain a little help by consciously selecting something positive to think about. Any positive thought will do to refocus your brain's attention. When things are going well, and your mood is good, this is relatively easy. When things are going poorly, and your mind is flooded with negative thoughts, this can be a challenge. In these moments, think about your day and identify one positive thing that happened, no matter how small. If you can't think of something from the current day, reflect on the previous day or even the previous week. Or perhaps there is an exciting event you are looking forward to that you can focus your attention on.

The goal of step two is to give your brain a new focus point so it does not default back to negativity. In step one we learnt to pause to slow the negative momentum and separate truth from fiction. So we do not end up back in negativity our brain needs a new focus point. Each time you start dwelling on the negative you need to draw your focus back to the positive your identified. We must replace the negative with a positive. No doubt at time you may find this difficult. If that occurs repeat step one; write down the negative thoughts to discredit their validity, and then allow yourself to freely enjoy positive thoughts.



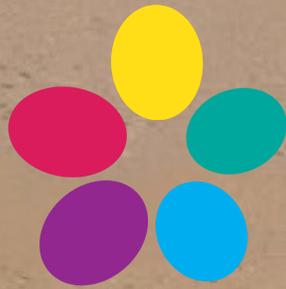
3. Practice Gratitude

Leading author and University of Houston Research Professor [Dr Brene Brown](#) has spent twelve years studying more than 11,000 pieces of data to understand how to become wholehearted. As detailed in [this Global Leadership article titled "Leading Yourself"](#) Dr Brown explains she expected individuals who described themselves as joyful to also actively practice gratitude but this was not the case. Instead she found gratitude needed to be practiced and she does not mean simply feeling grateful. The simple act of creating a ritual of verbalising to others what you are most grateful for invites joy into your life. Dr Brown quotes a Jesuit priest who says "It's not joy that makes us grateful, it's gratitude that makes us joyful". In fact the [University of California](#) conducted research which showed thinking about what you're grateful for reduces the stress hormone cortisol by 23%. It found that people who worked daily to cultivate an attitude of gratitude experienced improved mood, energy and substantially less anxiety due to lower cortisol levels.

You cultivate an attitude of gratitude by taking time out every day to focus on the positive. Step one is to pause, determine truth versus fiction. Step two is to refocus your brain on positive thoughts and step three is to shift gears by building gratitude into your daily life.

Summary

Clearly this is a very basic guide to what is a comprehensive shift. Taking these three steps can have a tremendous influence because they train your brain; refocusing it to have a positive focus and breaking old habits. Given the mind's natural tendency to negative thoughts every step you can make to shift this habit can have a positive impact on your physical health as well. In these tough times there is never a better time to start.



THE IMPACT SUITE

The Impact Suite was founded with a view that all social impact organisations, irrespective of their location or size, should have access to the best experts and ideas in order to maximise their impact for our community. Too many organisations struggle with limited resources, meanwhile stakeholders and donors tend to focus on simple measures like 'administrative expenses' while missing the value of impact. With founders from all aspects within the sector including charity founders, board/committee members, consultants, technology developers, and analysts - we have developed a proprietary Social Impact Rating which focuses on governance aspects and social impact of Australian charities.

The Impact Suite's proprietary Social Impact Rating is only for Australian Charities and other social impact organisations. We have extensively researched and consider 5 key factors important to an organisation's sustainability and effectiveness in order for them to make a difference in our community. The Impact Suite has taken the symbolism of the lotus flower and used it as a vital measure of an organisation's sustainability with each petal representing the 5 key success factors - Purpose, People, Process, Impact and Review. The Social Impact Rating helps anyone instantly identify good organisations.

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