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# How (and Why) to Stay Positive

By Dr. Travis Bradberry

When faced with setbacks and challenges, we've all received the well-meaning advice to "stay positive." The greater the challenge, the more this glass-half-full wisdom can come across as Pollyannaish and unrealistic. It's hard to find the motivation to focus on the positive when positivity seems like nothing more than wishful thinking.

The real obstacle to positivity is that our brains are hard-wired to look for and focus on threats. This survival mechanism served humankind well back when we were hunters and gatherers, living each day with the very real threat of being killed by someone or something in our immediate surroundings. That was eons ago. Today, this mechanism breeds pessimism and negativity through the mind's tendency to wander until it finds a threat. These "threats" magnify the perceived likelihood that things are going—and/or are going to go—poorly. When the threat is real and lurking in the bushes down the path, this mechanism serves you well. When the threat is imagined and you spend two months convinced the project you're working on is going to flop, this mechanism leaves you with a soured view of reality that wreaks havoc in your life.

## Positivity and Your Health

Pessimism is trouble because it's bad for your health. Numerous studies have shown that optimists are physically and psychologically healthier than pessimists. Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania has conducted extensive research on the topic, and often explores an important distinction—whether people consider their failures the product of personal deficits beyond their control or mistakes they can fix with effort. Seligman finds much higher rates of depression in people who pessimistically attribute their failures to personal

deficits. Optimists, however, treat failure as a learning experience and believe they can do better in the future.

To examine physical health, Seligman worked with researchers from Dartmouth and the University of Michigan on a study that followed people from age 25 to 65 to see how their levels of pessimism or optimism influenced or correlated with their overall health. The researchers found that pessimists' health deteriorated far more rapidly as they aged. Seligman's findings are similar to research conducted by the Mayo Clinic that found optimists have lower levels of cardiovascular disease and longer life-spans. Although the exact mechanism through which pessimism affects health hasn't been identified, researchers at Yale and the University of Colorado found that pessimism is associated with a weakened immune response to tumors and infection. Researchers from the Universities of Kentucky and Louisville went so far as to inject optimists and pessimists with a virus to measure their immune response. The researchers found optimists had a significantly stronger immune response than pessimists.

## Positivity and Performance

Keeping a positive attitude isn't just good for your health. Martin Seligman has also studied the connection between positivity and performance. In one study in particular, he measured the degree to which insurance salespeople were optimistic or pessimistic in their work, including whether they attributed failed sales to personal deficits beyond their control or circumstances they could improve with effort. Optimistic salespeople sold 37% more policies than pessimists, who were twice as likely to leave the company during their first year of employment.

Seligman has studied positivity more than anyone, and

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he believes in the ability to turn pessimistic thoughts and tendencies around with simple effort and know-how. But Seligman doesn't just believe this. His research shows that people can transform a tendency toward pessimistic thinking into positive thinking through simple techniques that create lasting changes in behavior long after they are discovered.

Your brain just needs a little help to defeat its negative inner voice. To that end, I've provided two simple steps for you to follow that will begin training your brain to focus on the positive.

## **Step 1 - Separate Fact from Fiction**

The first step in learning to focus on the positive requires knowing how to stop negative self-talk in its tracks. The more you ruminate on negative thoughts, the more power you give them. Most of our negative thoughts are just that—thoughts, not facts. When you find yourself believing the negative and pessimistic things your inner voice says, it's time to stop and write them down. Literally stop what you're doing and write down what you're thinking. Once you've taken a moment to slow down the negative momentum of your thoughts, you will be more rational and clear-headed in evaluating their veracity. Evaluate these statements to see if they're factual. You can bet the statements aren't true any time you see words like *never, always, worst, ever*, etc. Do you really *always* lose your keys? Of course not. Perhaps you forget them frequently, but most days you do remember them. Are you *never* going to find a solution to your problem? If you really are that stuck, maybe you've been resisting asking for help. Or if it really is an intractable problem, then why are you wasting your time beating your head against the wall? If your statements still look like facts once they're on paper, take them to a friend or colleague you can trust, and see if he or she agrees with you. Then the truth will

surely come out.

When it feels like something *always* or *never* happens, this is just your brain's natural threat tendency inflating the perceived frequency or severity of an event. Identifying and labeling your thoughts as *thoughts* by separating them from the facts will help you escape the cycle of negativity and move toward a positive new outlook.

## **POSITIVITY IS CONTAGIOUS**



*Click on the image to view this clip.*

## **Step 2 - Identify a Positive**

Now that you have a tool to snap yourself out of self-defeating, negative thoughts, it's time to help your brain learn what you want it to focus on—the positive. 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

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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 point here is you must have something positive that you're ready to shift your attention to when your thoughts turn negative. In step one, you learned how to strip the power from negative thoughts by separating fact from fiction. Step two is to replace the negative with a positive. Once you have identified a positive thought, draw your attention to that thought each time you find yourself dwelling on the negative. If that proves difficult, you can repeat the process of writing down the negative thoughts to discredit their validity, and then allow yourself to freely enjoy positive thoughts.

I realize these two steps sound incredibly basic, but they have tremendous power because they retrain your brain to have a positive focus. These steps break old habits, if you force yourself to use them. Given the mind's natural tendency to wander toward negative thoughts, we can all use a little help with staying positive. Put these steps to use, and you'll reap the physical, mental, and performance benefits that come with a positive frame of mind. 

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## How Negativity and Complaining Literally Rot Your Brain

By Dr. Travis Bradberry

Rodent studies have long shown that stress can have a lasting, negative impact on the brain. Exposure to even a few days of stress compromises the effectiveness of the neurons in the hippocampus—an important area of the brain responsible for reasoning and memory. Weeks of stress cause reversible damage to neuronal dendrites (the small “arms” that neurons use to communicate with each other), and months of stress can permanently destroy neurons.

Evidence of the same effect in humans has long been scant. However, recent improvements in MRI resolution mean scientists can now see the same effects of stress in people. Stress is a formidable threat for those of us who want to think clearly, reason effectively, and have a decent memory.

### Negative People Are Stressful: Just Ask Little Harry



Click on the image to view this clip.

Most sources of stress are easy to identify. If your non-profit is waiting to land a grant that your organization needs to function, or you are working on the biggest project of your career, you're bound to feel stress, but the unexpected sources of stress are the ones that can take you by surprise and harm your brain. Recent research from the Department of Biological and Clinical Psychology at Friedrich Schiller University in Germany found that exposure to negative emotional stimuli—the same kind of exposure you get in the presence of complainers and otherwise negative people—caused subjects' brains to have the same emotional reactions that they experienced when stressed. Your brain gets sucked into a negative emotional state when exposed to negative people, and—just like a stress response—the longer you endure this state the worse it is for your brain.

Since stress and negativity lurk everywhere, use the following strategies to help protect your brain.

#### 1. Set Limits with Complainers

Complainers are bad news because they wallow in their problems and fail to focus on solutions. They want people to join their pity party so that they can feel better about themselves. People often feel pressure to listen to complainers because they don't want to be seen as callous or rude, but there's a fine line between lending a sympathetic ear and getting sucked into their negative emotional spiral. You can avoid this only by setting limits and distancing yourself when necessary. Think of it this way: if the complainer were smoking, would you sit there all afternoon inhaling the second-hand smoke? You'd distance yourself, and you should do the same with complainers. A great way to set limits is to ask complainers how they intend to fix the problem. They will either quiet down or redirect the conversation in a

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productive direction.

## 2. Squash the Negative Self-Talk

Sometimes you absorb the negativity of other people, and other times you create it for yourself. There's nothing wrong with feeling bad about something, but your self-talk (the thoughts you have about your feelings) can either magnify the negativity or help you move past it. Negative self-talk is unrealistic, unnecessary, and self-defeating. It sends you into a downward emotional spiral that is difficult to pull out of. You should avoid negative self-talk at all costs. Be wary of the following two types of negative self-talk in particular and try the alternatives:

### i. Turn *I always or I never into just this time or sometimes.*

Your actions are unique to that particular situation, no matter how often you think you mess up. Make certain your thoughts follow suit. When you start treating each situation as its own animal and stop beating yourself up over every mistake, you'll stop making your problems bigger than they really are.

### ii. Replace judgmental statements like *I'm an idiot* with factual ones like *I made a mistake.*

Thoughts that attach a permanent label to you leave no room for improvement. Factual statements are objective and situational, and help you focus on what you can change.

## 3. Quit Focusing on Problems—Focus on Solutions

Where you focus your attention determines your emotional state. When you fixate on the problems you're facing, you create and prolong negative emotions and stress. When you focus on actions to better yourself and

your circumstances, you create a sense of personal efficacy that produces positive emotions.

## 4. Get Some Sleep

A good night's sleep makes you more positive, creative, and proactive in your approach to problems. Being well rested helps you deal with your own negativity, and gives you the perspective you need to set limits with complainers and negative people.

There's a reason the squeaky wheel gets the grease—complainers are hard to ignore. Whether you or they are the source of your stress, apply the strategies above, and you'll remove the power that complaining and negativity hold over you. 

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## Six Toxic Beliefs That Will Ruin Your Career

By Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

Self-talk is driven by critical beliefs that you hold about yourself, and is manifested in the things that you think as you move through your day. It plays an understated but powerful role in your ability to succeed, because your beliefs can both spur you forward toward achieving your goals and hold you back. As Henry Ford said, "He who believes he can and he who believes he cannot are both correct."

### **Self-Talk Can Have A Lot to Say**



Click on the image to view this clip.

When it comes to self-talk, there are six toxic beliefs that hold people back more than any others. Be mindful of your tendencies to succumb to these beliefs, so that they don't derail your career.

### **Toxic Belief #1: Perfection = Success**

Human beings, by our very nature, are fallible. When perfection is your goal, you're always left with a nagging sense of failure, and end up spending your time lamenting what you failed to accomplish, instead of enjoying what you were able to achieve.

### **Toxic Belief #2: My Destiny is Predetermined**

Far too many people succumb to the highly irrational idea that they are destined to succeed or fail. Make no mistake about it, your destiny is in your own hands, and blaming multiple successes or failures on forces beyond your control is nothing more than a cop out. Sometimes life will deal you difficult cards to play, and other times you'll be holding aces. Your willingness to give your all in playing any hand you're holding determines your ultimate success or failure in life.

### **Toxic Belief #3: I "Always" or "Never" Do That**

There isn't anything in life that you always or never do. You may do something a lot or not do something enough, but framing your behavior in terms of "always" or "never" is a form of self-pity. It makes you believe that you have no control of yourself and will never change. Don't succumb to it.

### **Toxic Belief #4: I Succeed When Others Approve of Me**

Regardless of what people think of you at any particular moment, one thing is certain—you're never as good or bad as they say you are. It's impossible to turn off your reactions to what others think of you, but you can take people's opinions with a grain of salt. That way, no matter what people think about you, your self-worth comes only from within.

### **Toxic Belief #5: My Past = My Future**

Repeated failures can erode your self-confidence and make it hard to believe you'll achieve a better outcome

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## Six Toxic Beliefs That Will Ruin Your Career

in the future. Most of the time, these failures result from taking risks and trying to achieve something that isn't easy. Just remember that success lies in your ability to rise in the face of failure. Anything worth achieving is going to require you to take some risks, and you can't allow failure to stop you from believing in your ability to succeed.

### Toxic Belief #6: My Emotions = Reality

If you've read *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, you know how to take an objective look at your feelings and separate fact from fiction. If not, you might want to read it. Otherwise, your emotions will continue to skew your sense of reality, making you vulnerable to the negative self-talk that can hold you back from achieving your full potential.

If you can overcome the self-defeating beliefs above, you'll make great strides in improving your self-talk. Special thanks to Geoffrey James for the article concept. 

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## Three Traps People Fall Into That Limit Their Happiness

By Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

Almost every action we take in life is aimed at achieving or maintaining "happiness"—that elusive state where we feel contentment, satisfaction, and even bliss. TalentSmart® has by now tested more than a million people and trained tens of thousands more, and we are often struck by the commonalities we see between people, particularly when they fall victim to the same traps that limit their ability to reach their full potential.

To that end, here are three prominent traps which people fall into. They are easily fixed, but until then they severely limit our potential for happiness.

### 1) We Hold Our Feelings In

One of the great misconceptions concerning emotional intelligence is that it is about repressing our feelings and holding them in. While it is true there are feelings that high EQ individuals do not allow to erupt on impulse, that does not mean those feelings are not expressed. Emotional intelligence means honoring our feelings and allowing ourselves to experience the catharsis that comes from embracing them for what they are. Then we express them in a manner that helps rather than hinders our ability to reach our goals.

### 2) We Fight Change

Change is an inevitable part of life, and those who fight it do so because they are struggling to remain in control. The problem with this approach is that fighting change actually limits our control over the situation by putting up a barrier between ourselves and the actions we need to take to improve our situation.

The idea here is to prepare for change. This is not a

guessing game where we test our accuracy in anticipating what comes next, but rather it means thinking through the consequences of potential changes so that we are not caught off guard if they surface. The first step is to admit to ourselves that even the most stable and trusted facets of our life are not completely under our control. People change, businesses go through ebbs and flows, and things simply do not stay the same for long. When we allow ourselves to anticipate change—and understand our options if changes occur—we prevent ourselves from getting bogged down by strong emotions like shock, surprise, fear, and disappointment when changes actually happen. While we are still likely to experience these negative emotions, our acceptance that change is an inevitable part of life enables us to focus and think rationally, which is critical to making the most out of an unlikely, unwanted, or otherwise unforeseen situation.

### 3) We Numb Ourselves With Technology

Everyone deserves the opportunity to binge-watch a TV show now and then or to switch on our Kindle and get lost in a book. The real question is how much time we spend plugged in (to video games, the TV, the tablet, the computer, the phone, etc.) and whether it makes us feel good or simply makes us numb. When our escape becomes a constant source of distraction, it is a sure sign we have fallen into the trap of too much of a good thing.

If we want to cut back on the amount of time we are plugged in, we have to choose blocks of time where we can cut the cord and go offline. It is amazing how refreshing these breaks are when we choose an alternative activity that is equally stimulating. As we grow more comfortable without the pacifier of technology, we can gradually increase the amount of time we spend away from it.



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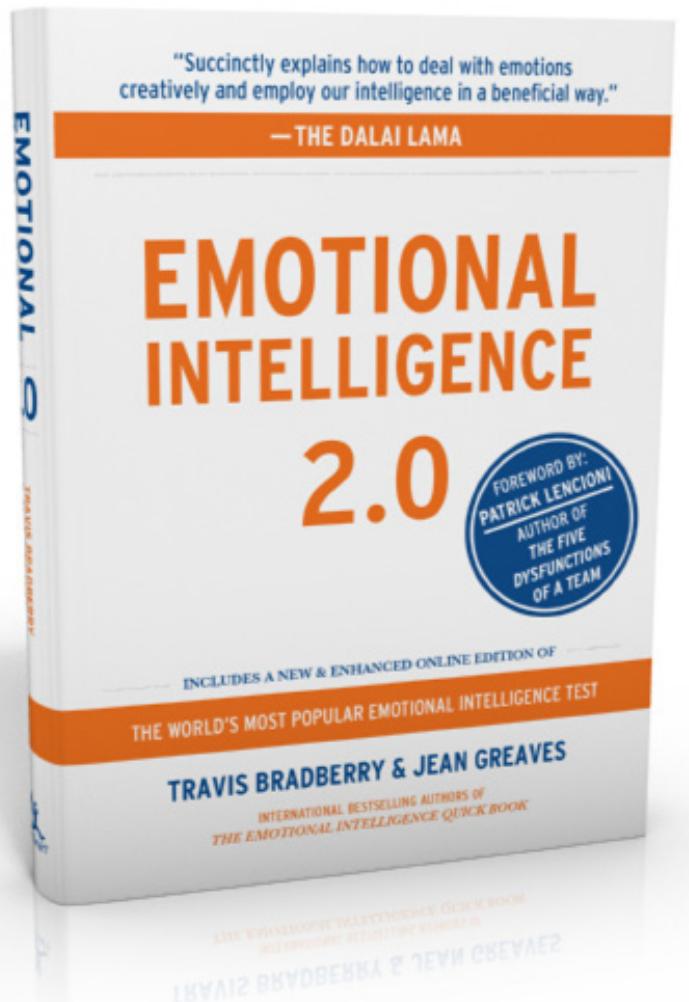
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Dr. Travis Bradberry is the award-winning author of the #1 best selling book, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, and the cofounder of TalentSmart®--a consultancy that serves more than 75% of Fortune 500 companies and is the world's leading provider of emotional intelligence tests and training.

His bestselling books have been translated into 25 languages and are available in more than 150 countries. Dr. Bradberry has written for, or been covered by, *Newsweek*, *BusinessWeek*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, Inc., *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Harvard Business Review*.

Dr. Bradberry is a world-renowned expert in emotional intelligence who speaks regularly in corporate and public settings. Example engagements include Intel, Coca-Cola, Microsoft, Wells Fargo, Boston Scientific, NY Life, Fortune Brands, Salesforce.com, Fortune Magazine Growth Summit, The Conference Board: Learning from Legends, and Excellence in Government.



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