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Q 12 MIN READ

Positive Thinking, Thought Awareness, and Rational Thinking

Quite often, the way we feel about a situation comes from our perception of it. Often that perception is right, but sometimes it isn't.

For instance, sometimes we're unreasonably hard with ourselves, or we can jump to wrong conclusions about people's motives. This can cause problems and make us unhappy, and it can lead us to be unfair to others.

Positive Thinking, Thought Awareness, and Rational Thinking are simple tools that help you turn this around.

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Introduction

A commonly accepted definition of stress, developed by Richard S. Lazarus in his book **Psychological Stress and the Coping Process**, is that it occurs when someone thinks that the demands on them "exceed the personal and social resources that the individual is able to mobilize."

In becoming stressed, people must make two main judgments:

1. First, they must feel threatened by the situation.
2. They must judge whether their capabilities and resources are sufficient to meet the threat.

How stressed someone feels depends on how much damage they think the situation could cause, and how far their resources meet the demands of the situation.

Perception is key to this as (technically) situations are not stressful in their own right. Rather it's our interpretation of the situation that sets the level of stress we feel. Quite often, obviously, sometimes we get it right and we react to situations. Some situations may actually be stressful, and we may threaten us physically or mentally, or in our career. Here, stress and adrenaline are part of the "early warning system" that alerts us to the threat from these situations.

Very often, however, we are overly harsh and unjust in our assessments, in a way that we would never be with friends or team members. This, along with other negative thinking, can cause intense stress and unhappiness, and can severely undermine our self-confidence.

Warning:

Stress can cause severe health problems and, in extreme cases, death. While these stress management techniques have been shown to have a positive effect on reducing stress, they are for guidance only, and readers should take the advice of suitably qualified medical professionals. Stress is a serious matter, and anyone who experiences it for stress is causing significant or persistent unhappiness. Health professionals should also be consulted before any major change in diet or levels of exercise.

Three Steps to Positive Thinking

1. Understanding Thought Awareness

Thought Awareness is Thought Awareness comes with logging stress in a **Stress Diary** [1]. One of the benefits of using a Stress Diary is that, for one or two weeks, you'll be "tuned in" to your stress levels. You'll be able to see how your thoughts and feelings are related, and can also include difficult or unpleasant emotions and situations that you perceive as negative.

By logging your negative thoughts for a reasonable period of time, you can quickly see patterns in your negative thinking. When you analyze your diary at the end of the period, you can see which are the most common and most damaging thoughts. Tackle these as a priority.

Thought awareness is the first step in the process of managing negative thoughts, as you can only manage thoughts that you're aware of.

2. Developing Rational Thinking

The next step in dealing with negative thinking is to challenge the negative thoughts that you identified using the Thought Awareness technique. Look at every thought you wrote down in the Stress Diary, and ask yourself whether the thoughts are rational, and does it stand up to scrutiny.

As an example, by analyzing your Stress Diary you might identify that you have frequently had the following negative thoughts:

- Feelings of inadequacy.
- Worries that your performance in your job will not be good enough.
- An anxiety that things outside your control will undermine your efforts.
- Worries about other people's reactions to your work.

Starting with these, you might challenge these negative thoughts in the ways shown:

- **Feelings of inadequacy:** Have you trained and educated yourself as well as you reasonably could to do the job? Do you have the experience and resources you need to do your job? Do you have a reasonable amount of knowledge and skill? If you can't do this, then you've done everything that you should sensibly do. If you're still worried, are you setting yourself unattainably high standards for doing the job?
- **Worries about performance:** Do you have the training that a reasonable person would think is needed to do a good job? Have you planned appropriately? Do you have the information and resources that you need? Have you cleared the time need, and used up your support team appropriately? Have you prepared thoroughly? If you haven't, then you haven't done everything you can. If you have, then you are well positioned to give the best performance that you can.
- **Problems with issues outside your control:** Have you conducted appropriate contingency planning? Have you thought through and managed all major risks and contingencies appropriately? If so, you will be well prepared to handle potential problems.
- **Worry about other people's reactions:** If you have put in good preparation, and you do your best, then you can't do more than this. If you've done this, then you've done all you reasonably can and are only focused on the needs of your customers. Other people are likely to respond well. If people are not fair, then this is something outside our control.

Tip:

Don't make the mistake of generalizing a single incident. OK, you made a mistake at work, but that doesn't mean that you're bad at your job.

Similarly, make sure you take the long-term view when considering that you're finding stressful. Just because you're finding new responsibilities stressful now, doesn't mean that they will **always** be stressful in the future.

Often, the best thing to do is to rise above unfair comments. Write your rational response to each negative thought in the Rational Thought column on the **worksheet**.

Tip:

If you find it difficult to look at your negative thoughts objectively, imagine that you are your best friend or a respected coach or mentor. Look at the list of negative thoughts. Imagine that they were written down by someone you were giving objective advice to, and think about how you'd challenge these thoughts.

When you challenge negative thoughts rationally, you should be able to see quickly whether the thoughts are wrong, or whether they have some substance to them. Where there is some substance, take appropriate action. In these cases, negative thinking has given you an early warning of action that you need to take.

3. Positive Thinking Exercises

Where you have used Rational Thinking to challenge incorrect negative thinking, it's often useful to use rational, positive thoughts and affirmations to counter them. It's also useful to look at the outcome and see if there are any opportunities that are offered by it.

Affirmations [2] help you to build self-confidence. By taking your affirmations on the clear, rational assessments of facts that you made using Rational Thinking you can undo the damage that negative thinking may have done to your self-confidence.

Tip:

Your affirmations will be strongest if they are specific, are expressed in the present tense, and have strong emotional content.

Continuing the examples above, positive affirmations might be:

- **Feelings of inadequacy:** "I am well trained for this. I have the experience, the tools, and the knowledge I need. I have thought through and prepared for all possible issues. I can do a really good job."
- **Worries about performance:** "I have researched and planned well for this, and I thoroughly understand the problem. I have the time, resources and help that I need. I am well prepared to do an excellent job."
- **Problems with issues outside your control:** "We have thought about everything that might reasonably happen, and have planned how we can handle all likely contingencies. Everyone is ready to help everyone, and we are very poised to react flexibly and effectively to unusual events."
- **Worry about other people's reaction:** "I am well prepared and am doing the best I can. For people will respect this. I will rise above any unfair criticism in a mature and professional way."

If appropriate, write these affirmations down on your **worksheet**, so that you can use them when you need them.

As well as allowing you to structure useful affirmations, part of Positive Thinking is to look at negative situations and see what good, if any, can come from them. Many people have successfully overcome these situations with open up opportunities. You'll gain new skills, you'll be seen as someone who can handle difficult challenges, and you may open up new career opportunities.

Make sure that you take the time to identify these opportunities and focus on them as part of your positive thoughts.

Tip:

In the past, people have advocated thinking positively almost recklessly, as if it is a magic formula that means that all problems should be solved or overcome. Though, first, decide rationally what goals you can realistically attain with hard work, and then use positive thinking to reinforce these.

Key Points

This set of tools helps you to manage and counter the stress of negative thinking.

Thought Awareness helps you identify the negative thinking, unpleasant memories, and misinterpretation of situations that may interfere with your performance and damage your self-confidence. This allows you to deal with them.

Rational Thinking helps you to challenge these negative thoughts and either learn from them, or refuse them as incorrect.

You can then use Positive Thinking to create positive affirmations that you can use to counter negative thoughts. These affirmations neutralize negative thoughts and build your self-confidence. You can also use this approach to find the opportunities that are almost always present, to some degree, in a difficult situation.

Download Worksheet

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Ratings

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WillMac 2020-10-07 12:41:13	★★★★☆
This book link at the top of the article contains a typo; the word "of" should not be there: "Psychological of Stress and the Coping Process."	
MercyMontague 2020-10-03 12:49:06	★★★★☆
Superb	
Arnold67 2020-03-23 13:54:42	★★★★☆
sin_due 2020-09-09 19:32:52	★★★★☆
maxwelsy 2020-08-18 12:48:50	★★★★☆

1 | 2 | 3 | 15

Comments (45)

Write your message...

Post Comment

BIBT wrote — Over a month ago

Hi TASO95,

Thank you so much for those words of support and affirmation for Michel.

Hearing your story about remodeling your house is very inspiring, and I hope you are able to complete everything the way you would like it to be. The sense of pride will be so reassuring, I'm sure.

BIBT
Mind Tools Team

Report

TASO95 wrote — Over a month ago

Hello Admiral, I know exactly how you feel, only yesterday I was in utter despair, I've been in a state of despair for a long time, I'm 50 and I live with my Mum, I'm 50 and my house is getting me down so much, I've ripped out my kitchen which means I have no heavy going but looking at it, it just seems so much, I've been so overwhelmed by it that I haven't been able to do anything, I've been so tense and water was spraying everywhere and there to top this off he could get on the dog was missing so I couldn't plug it in. Thankfully, these days the internet is a wonderful thing, I found a post that could receive text from my mum.

I completely agree with Michele Jones, using "I can do this" really helped, I ran out of the house and I went to the local shops and I bought a few things, I researched on line and even with the things left to do in the kitchen, I've written each thing down, ticked the things I know I can do and things I can't, no, The things I can't I'm going to do, I'm using the internet, forums, google and YouTube to learn how to do the tasks, I am capable, I just need to learn and I'm the only one holding me back. I hope this helps. Take care. Well wisher.

Report

Michele wrote — Over a month ago

Hello Admiral,

I empathise with you. There have been times in my life where my confidence was so completely undermined I felt overwhelmed by everything. I'm sorry to hear that you was "Low as the Ocean" Another tool I use, instead of affirmations, is to find music with powerful lyrics. Usually embodied in the song are powerful affirmations you can sing or repeat to yourself.

Michele
Mind Tools Team

Report

Admiral wrote — Over a month ago

"Learn to think positively..." This is easier said than done. What about when self esteem and self confidence have completely gone? I'm 50 years old and I'm back in hell if I could even think of a self affirmation to repeat the words would stick in my throat.

Report

Michele wrote — Over a month ago

Hi Lisa_Pal,

Welcome to the club! I am not sure if a transcript is available. I will check with our transcriptionist. Meanwhile, I'm sorry that you missed it when the video was produced and will get back to you when I hear from them.

In the meantime, if there's anything else you need, please let us know. We are here to help. I'd also encourage you to introduce yourself in the Forums. The Forums are the place where members interact with the Mind Tools Team. Bring your questions and comments there. We all learn from each other over there. The URL for the Welcome forum is:

http://www.mindtools.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=55-1072

I will be back in touch.

Michele
Mind Tools Team

Report

Lisa_Pal wrote — Over a month ago

This looks like a good tool, but I'm deaf and can't hear the video. Is there a transcript of the video available?

Report

BIBT wrote — Over a month ago

Hi catmurphy,

Thank you for your request for references for this article. Please apply to our Permissions Help Desk by following this link:
http://www.mindtools.com/pages/Permissions.php?n=stigmaremovalwork&page and fill out the form. We'll get back to you with your essay, and thank you for including Mind Tools in your studies.

Report

catmurphy wrote — Over a month ago

Hi could like to references this article in an essay but cannot find an author name? Can anyone advise who this should be referenced too. Thanks

Report

BIBT wrote — Over a month ago

Hi spartan,

It's good lap here that our article was able to turn the day around for you. Sometimes all we need is a different perspective to ground us again.

Report

spartan wrote — Over a month ago

Today was an awful one. So I turned to this learning stream to try to turn things around. I found the lesson very helpful. It's better I left, because I began to see things differently and more optimistically. Thanks

Report

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