Why Trying to "Think Positive" All the Time Could Make You Feel Worse

Description

"Don't worry, be happy!"

"Just stay positive!"

"Don't be nervous/sad/upset/frustrated/etc.!"

From an early age, we are often encouraged – both explicitly, and often, more subtly – to maintain a positive mental attitude.

And through the stories we hear, whether of elite athletes or undersized-yet-unfailingly-optimistic anthropomorphic trains, it can be easy to internalize the idea that to be successful, we must crush those negative thoughts in our head and stay positive no matter what.

There's a ton of research that does support the value of positive thinking. But sometimes it can be pretty exhausting to keep it up.

Because inevitably, we do experience things in life that are disappointing, discouraging, or frustrating. Heck, sometimes we just feel kind of blah for no apparent reason. And when life throws us curveballs, most of us do have moments of pessimism, doubt, or anxiety.

So just how critical is it that we stay positive 24/7, anyway?

How do you "approach" negative thoughts and emotions?

In recent years, there has been increasing research interest in the way that different people approach the negative thoughts and emotions they experience.

Some folks tend to **judge these negative thoughts and emotions as "bad"** and try to change them. While other folks are more inclined to **simply accept them** as normal things that our brain does to us from time to time and move on.

Those are two pretty different approaches, so a team of researchers ([Ford et al., 2018](#)) surveyed 1003 undergraduate students to find out how these two approaches to negative thoughts and emotions might play out in their lives.

Students were asked to respond to questions like "I tell myself I shouldn't be feeling the way that I'm feeling" (where 1=never or very rarely true and 5=very often or always true) and also completed measures of psychological well-being, life satisfaction, depression, and anxiety.

So was there any relationship between their approach to negativity and their mental well-being?

A paradoxical finding?

Indeed there was! Specifically, the researchers found that the more **accepting** students were of negative thoughts and emotions, the **greater well-being** and **satisfaction with life** they reported. More acceptance of negativity was linked to **fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety** as well.

Weird, right? The more ok they were with experiencing negative thoughts and emotions, the less mental stress they experienced?!

The results might seem a little paradoxical at first, but they actually kind of make sense when you think about it.

Three reasons why this makes sense

As the researchers explain, people who are more accepting of their negative thoughts and emotions are a) **less likely to dwell on these thoughts** (which just increases the time you're stewing in that negativity), b) **less likely to try to stop these kinds of thoughts** (because that often just makes them stronger), and c) **less likely to experience "negative meta-emotional reactions"** to these negative thoughts (like feeling shame about feeling depressed).

In other words, "when people accept (vs. judge) their mental experiences, those experiences run their natural – and relatively short-lived – course, rather than being exacerbated."

Which might sound all fine and dandy in theory, but if you're thinking there's no way you'll be able to simply accept your latest audition disappointment or the snarky thing your stand partner said at rehearsal today that made you feel really small, there's **one key detail to clarify**.

Accepting your emotional experience vs. the situation

Specifically, the researchers found that there was a difference between accepting one's **mental experience** and accepting one's **situation**.

And what does that mean?

Well, if you have a performance or audition that didn't go so great, it's perfectly natural and ok to **feel** disappointed. And it's not going to help to beat yourself up for not bouncing back faster.

Like, if your 5-year old is scared of water and doesn't want to jump off the diving board, you wouldn't use anger or shame to get them to stop feeling fear, right? Because that would just produce a whole cocktail of other emotions on top of the fear.

On the other hand, accepting that you're feeling bummed out (helpful!) is not the same as accepting the **performance** (not helpful!). Because you *can* make changes in your preparation and try to set yourself up to play better the next time.

Does this apply to performances too?

And this takes us to one of the team's follow-up studies.

To see if the findings about emotional acceptance might also relate to performance tasks, 156 participants were asked to complete a stressful public speaking task.

The researchers videotaped the participants giving a speech on why their communication skills qualify them for a job they applied for. And to add additional pressure, they were told that their speech would be evaluated by judges trained to critically evaluate both verbal and non-verbal communication.

And was emotional acceptance helpful in this situation as well?

Acceptance wins again

Yes!

Much like in the first study, the participants who scored higher in emotional acceptance experienced **fewer negative emotions** during their speaking performance.

Again, paradoxically, it seems that **the more accepting participants were of negative mental thoughts and emotions, the less distressed they were during the speaking task**, because they were ok with feeling whatever nerves or anxiety the situation prompted.

Which is actually consistent with a relatively new approach to treating depression and anxiety that's known as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (or Training). Many of the principles of ACT are increasingly being applied to high-level athletic performance as well music (you can learn more about how ACT relates to high-level performance for musicians specifically in this podcast episode).

The anxiety double whammy

Over the years, I think a lot of us have internalized the notion that being nervous is a no-no. And that if we still do still feel nervous on stage, it's because we didn't practice enough. Or even worse, that if we feel nervous even after practicing diligently, we may just not be cut out for performing.

Which isn't true, of course. And just results in a kind of emotional double whammy.

Where we not only feel the nerves themselves, but a whole layer of other crappy uncomfortable negative stuff on top. Which makes an already challenging performance even more difficult. And can lead to subpar playing that then appears to prove the thing we were afraid of in the first place.

The tl;dr version (or, farting in an elevator)

It's all a bit like the experience of farting in a crowded elevator.

Like, in the immediate aftermath, there is the matter of the stinkiness. Which is unpleasant, but is over and done with pretty quickly (i.e. acceptance).

What tends to be more painful and distressing, is the embarrassment and shame (i.e. judgment) that we often add to the situation. Which sticks around long after the fumes have dissipated…

Takeaways

A positive mindset can certainly be an asset, but if you're having a bad day and feeling pessimistic, it sounds like it's also important to give yourself permission to let it be and let it pass. Because feeling guilty about being angry, or angry about feeling guilty, or disappointed about feeling disappointed just amplifies the negativity.

So perhaps this would be a good week to practice giving yourself (and your students) permission to feel apprehensive or slightly uneasy about an upcoming performance. And to be wary about offering well-intentioned advice like "Don't be nervous" or "There's nothing to be nervous about," which could be interpreted to mean "Being nervous is bad."

After all, we have only so much brainpower available at any given time. It's no fun if we spend the entire performance being so preoccupied with fighting an internal battle with our nerves, or telling ourselves that we shouldn't be nervous, that we get to the end of a performance and realize we never got a chance to say any of the things we actually wanted to say.

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Questions about anxiety and confidence?

If you have 60 seconds, I'd love to know what your **biggest questions are about performance anxiety and confidence** in a quick survey I'm doing.

I'll be using the results to set up a free training series that I'll send out in a couple weeks, so this will help me select topics that will be most useful to you! Thanks in advance – and here's the survey (it'll be active for 48 hours, until Tuesday, Nov. 15th): Performance Anxiety & Confidence survey.

(And if you're not already a subscriber, you can sign up here for free to make sure you get the series when it comes out.)

References

Ford, B. Q., Lam, P., John, O. P., & Mauss, I. B. (2018). The psychological health benefits of accepting negative emotions and thoughts: Laboratory, diary, and longitudinal evidence. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *115*(6), 1075–1092. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000157

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