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## The Power of Positive Negative Thinking

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First, two facts:

1. No one can live life on the "happiness only" end of the happy-unhappy continuum of life.
2. Unhappiness is normal and a fact of the human condition; human beings experience pain and suffering.

Millions of folks have spent millions of hours and dollars (over and above the workshops, DVDs, and books) to have counselors, coaches, and therapists support them in their efforts to "think positive." Many say Norman Vincent Peale started the "positive thinking" movement in 1952 with his book, "The Power of Positive Thinking." Many of today's self-help proponents, spiritual gurus and cognitive therapists suggest that simply turning a negative thought into a positive one will result in a greater sense of happiness, satisfaction and well-being.

Before offering my contrarian view, the following are two of the more popular "positive thinking" models.

Cognitive therapy, the gold-standard treatment for negative thinking posits that one can attack and "change" negative thoughts into positive ones, and develop new beliefs, rather than accept the negative thoughts.

A newer, therapeutic model (referred to as ACT acceptance and commitment therapy) suggests that we "disidentify" from our negative thoughts and beliefs attempting to see them as "reactions" to what we, and what we feel others, believe about ourselves and not allow our thought to "push us around" and control us. The practice here is to use mindfulness in observing of thoughts as though they are clouds floating across the sky, not getting caught up in them. This model suggests that we move away from negative thoughts and identify and focus on our values. The idea here is that folks cannot focus on the larger, important picture of life when caught up in their thinking. For me, the question here is "who is it", my True and Real, authentic self, or my ego-personality self who is identifying these values? The challenge is identifying our Core Values as opposed to our ego-personality-based values which are the root cause of our negative self-judgments, pain and suffering in the first place.

In fact, what I would like to offer is that "negative thinking" may be one of the most direct avenues to the experience of well being.

So, here is a third alternative approach to negative thinking - embrace it.

Our negative self-talk is generated by an *Inner Judge and Critic (IJC)*. The IJC is a part of us that believes that "you" or another "part of you" is not "good enough" and has to change in order for you to feel safe, secure or just be OK. It is important to note that the IJC is not "me", and that the mechanism of the IJC was firmly entrenched in our psyche by age seven. Contrary to other modalities, the IJC is not to be attacked, hated, pushed away, exiled, crushed or neglected; rather, as unseemly as it sounds, the IJC needs to be treated with compassion. Why?

Compassion is the key to authentic transformation and change. In "real life", we know that when someone feels attacked, compassion for the attacker is difficult. But, we know that someone or something which is criticizing is always afraid, perhaps under the guise of worry or concern, always afraid or threatened. So, here compassion is the key.

It's important to understand that our IJC is **not** criticizing "me," but rather "something in me" that needs attention. Dealing with our IJC, means seeing that it is **not** me and that I am not its **victim**.

## The Process

When we experience our harsh, demeaning, unaccepting, unloving IJC, these responses will support us:

1. becoming aware that our IJC is beginning an attack,
2. moving into a state of presence, sensing and focusing on our body, being with whatever outer or inner experience is happening in the moment; noticing how the IJC feels in our body and whether our IJC is a feeling/emotion, a voice, an image and/or a sensation,
3. sensing the IJC's fear, worry or concern,
4. becoming curious (without judgment) about what is making it so critical,
5. trusting that the IJC is here to help us and inviting it to make me aware of what it's *not wanting* to have happen to me, and
6. inviting the IJC to let me know what it's *wanting* for me to experience or feel

Presence is the antithesis of the inner process of judgment and criticism. In a state of presence, we move inward toward what we are feeling (not thinking!) with curiosity, openness, gentleness, and trust in a life-forward direction. We don't attempt to fix or change what we experience. We listen, sense, and allow it to be and change if that's what it needs. We don't "do" anything. If we judge or criticize the IJC in this moment, we will only exacerbate the problem and the discomfort.

From this place of presence, one can begin to bring compassion to the IJC even when feeling it was mean, cruel, harsh and angry. And, here's the important part. Compassion is required because the IJC is afraid that something might go wrong, or something might not be able to be fixed, or that others would be critical, etc. The IJC is afraid! And becoming aware of this is what allows an opening and softening - the precursors for true change and transformation.

Once we are compassionate, and aware of the IJC's fear, worry or concern, we can be empathic - understanding how the IJC feels from its point of view. Here, we can let go of agreeing with the IJC's attacks, or limiting and negative beliefs and acknowledge the IJC is scared or worried without our identifying with its thought or belief. The result is we let go, feel loose, free and unattached to the belief or thought. We also sense a release in our body.

In this place, there's a shift and a paradox. We see that what the IJC is attacking you for, or about, is just what the IJC *doesn't* want. The IJC says, for example, "You'll be a failure" and what we see is that failure is exactly what it doesn't want for you.

It's not unlike a parent saying to a child who is going out in the wintertime. "You'll catch your death of cold!" Would a parent predict that a child would die? No. The parent wants the child to put on warmer clothes. So that statement isn't really a prediction of death. It's a request with an expression of strong feeling, "Please put on warmer clothes, I'm so worried about you!" From this perspective, we understand that "You'll catch your death of cold" is actually an expression of what's *not* wanted. So, most often, our IJC is actually pointing to what it doesn't *want!* So, in this state, we can ask in a friendly way - extend an invitation to the IJC to reveal what it doesn't want.

Being in presence is the first and most essential step for shifting out of the deadlock between criticizer and criticized (the "mental" state"). In presence, when "you" feel attacked, remember that *you* are not the target, *you* are not being criticized. "*Something in you*" is being criticized by "*something in you*." When one is experiencing presence, one doesn't feel criticized. If I do feel criticized, then most likely I'm "in my head" trying to "figure it out" and I need to breathe, sense my physical self and focus on being in my body, and move into my greatest capacity for presence in the moment.

When it comes to negative thoughts, it is possible to imagine a state where we cannot be criticized - from

within or without. It's not about being closed or resistant to feedback. It's about not allowing any of it to make us feel bad about ourselves, our True Self or essence, who we really are.

Many people who are tormented by negative beliefs, thoughts and inner criticism have a hard time picturing a time when they'd be truly free of it. While we cannot "think" our way into such freedom, we can follow the process above and allow our IJC with compassion and invite a sense of what they're not wanting and wanting. Discovering the underlying truth, again and again, is the path that brings deep and lasting change and transformation.

**So, some questions for self-reflection are:**

- Are you aware when your Inner Judge and Critic (IJC) is operating?
- How do you generally respond when your IJC attacks you?
- Do you ever get caught up with your IJC and spiral down into fear, worry or concern?
- Do you understand that your IJC is not *you*?
- Do you ever try to "think positively?" How does that work for you over time?
- Do you have a tendency to bury your negative feelings rather than allow them and explore them?
- Have you ever experienced presence? What's that like for you?
- Did your parents or primary caregivers consistently judge or criticize you when you were growing up?
- Are you generally judgmental or critical of others?
- Can you envision a world where you are free from your Inner Judge and Critic?

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