

Increased Positivity Equals Increased Happiness

Recently, one of my clients, who suffers from depression, shared a story about his morning that was very revealing of a dynamic I see far too much of in my practice. He was heading to the office late because of a doctor's appointment, and freeway traffic was considerably lighter than during his typical rush hour commute. He made it to work in less than half his usual hour-long drive.

As I was about to comment on how nice that must have been for him, he added an addendum to his story. He pointed out that despite the fact that traffic was flowing freely, the traffic signal on the onramp was still merging cars onto the freeway one agonizing vehicle at a time. When I asked him why that detail came to mind, he replied, "Well, how stupid is it that the signal was still on even though there was no traffic at that hour?" Not surprisingly, his day had gone downhill from there.

Just as from the philosophically revealing question that asks if a glass is half-full or half-empty, a psychologist can tell a lot about a person based on whether he or she focuses on the half-hour of wide-open freeway... or the 60 seconds of waiting at the onramp. More and more, we are learning that for those who see the negative sides of things, life is considerably harder than for those who embrace positivity.

Dr. Martin Seligman, former head of the American Psychological Association, once noted that, "Human beings are naturally biased toward remembering the negative, attending to the negative, and expecting the worst." That having been said, he also noted that the subjective experiences people tended to value most highly were centered on the following: Well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow of happiness (in the present). I have yet to have a client disagree with this assertion. We *tend* to be negative, but we *want* to be positive.

There are seemingly limitless ways to achieve greater positivity. Examples include engaging in gratitude exercises, journaling about your most desirable qualities, performing daily acts of kindness, setting and achieving goals... A Yahoo search for "positivity exercises" will reveal countless more.

Inevitably, what strikes me on a professional level is this core truth: positivity increases when you *focus* on positive things. My clinical opinion is that the reason positivity exercises are so numerous is because it almost doesn't matter what you do. What matters is that you are focused on doing *something positive*. The real power of the exercise isn't in the specifics of the exercise, but rather in attenuating your mind upon positivity itself.

Another critical component of increasing positivity is that it works exponentially. In much the same way that exercise not only burns calories as you are working out but also increases your resting metabolism so that you burn more calories per hour even while sitting still, so, too, does

working on your positivity inspire an improvement in the way you feel even when you may not be focused specifically on positivity itself.

I encourage you to try it and see. Spend some time each day focusing on the positive things of life, and I firmly believe the feelings this focus creates will inspire you to live in a more positive way at all times. If I were to suggest one change that has the potential to impact the most lives in the most profound way, it would be this: *Improve your positivity!*

- Lance Miller