



When You Can't Change the World, Change Your Feelings

Arthur C. Brooks | December 2, 2021

Adjusting your attitude is easier than you think.

Everyone—even the most privileged among us—has circumstances they would like to change in their life. As the early sixth-century Roman philosopher Boethius put it, “One has abundant riches, but is shamed by his ignoble birth. Another is conspicuous for his nobility, but through the embarrassments of poverty would prefer to be obscure. A third, richly endowed with both, laments the loneliness of an unwedded life.”

Think about your own life and something causing you stress, anxiety, or sadness. For example, maybe you are struggling to find your job or career interesting and fulfilling. Or maybe you aren't getting much out of your friendships, and feel lonely. How might you improve the situation? Your answer might be, “I should move, get a new job, and meet new people.” In other words, you should change the outside world to make it better for you.

Not so easy, though, is it? Moving, changing jobs, and making an entirely new set of friends might be highly impractical at this point in your life. And in any case, you might suspect that you will take your problems with you, because, well, you can't move away from you.

I'm going to let you in on a secret that can help. Between the conditions around you and your response to them is a space. In this space, you have freedom. You can choose to try remodeling the world, or you can start by changing your reaction to it.

Sometimes, changing your circumstances is difficult but absolutely necessary, such as in cases of abuse or violence. And sometimes, changing your circumstances is fairly easy: If you are lethargic every morning, start going to bed earlier.

But in the gray areas in between, fighting against reality can be impossible, or incredibly inefficient. Maybe you have been diagnosed with a chronic illness for which there are no promising treatment options. Perhaps your romantic partner has left you against your wishes and cannot be persuaded otherwise. Maybe you have a job you like but a manager you don't, and no one will give you a new boss.

In these sorts of situations, changing how you feel can actually be much easier than changing your physical reality, even if it seems unnatural. Your emotions can seem out of your control at the best of times, and even more so during a crisis—which is exactly when changing them would give you the greatest benefit. That can be blamed in part on biology. Negative emotions such as anger and fear activate the amygdala, which increases vigilance toward threats and improves your ability to detect and avoid danger. In other words, stress makes you fight, flee, or freeze—not think. What would a prudent reaction be at this moment? Let's consider the options. This makes good evolutionary sense: Half a million years ago, taking time to manage your emotions would have made you a tiger's lunch.

But in the modern world, stress and anxiety are usually chronic, not episodic. Odds are, you no longer need your amygdala to help you outrun the tiger without asking your conscious brain's permission. Instead, you use it to handle the nonlethal problems that pester you all day long. Even if you don't have tigers to outrun, you can't relax in your cave, because the emails are piling up.

No surprise, then, that chronic stress often leads to maladaptive coping mechanisms in modern life. These include the misuse of drugs and alcohol, rumination on the sources of stress, selfharm, and self-blaming. These responses not only fail to provide long-term relief; they can compound our problems through addiction, depression, and increased anxiety. When these kinds of coping mechanisms don't help, a person can easily give up on managing their negative emotions and resort to changing the outside world instead.

Ancient thinkers recognized this difficulty but believed that we can manage our reactions effectively if we have the right tools. Buddhism posits that our minds are habitually unbalanced, but not intrinsically so; the key is to build new habits of thinking. Similarly, the Stoics believed that human reason, practiced studiously, could override knee-jerk emotions. These ideas (especially the last) have inspired modern schools of psychotherapy, such as rational emotive behavior therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy, which aim to create practical strategies for changing our reactions to negative situations in our life-and thus becoming happier.

If you've taken stock of your worries and decided that managing your negative emotions is a better strategy than trying to change the world around you, you can follow four steps to arrive at a happier frame of mind:

1. Notice your feelings.

When you observe your emotions as if they belonged to another person, you give yourself better advice. After all, you would never advise a friend anxiously waiting for a medical-test result to ruminate all day and then get drunk. Self-observation requires that you be mindful of what you are feeling in the moment and approach your emotions with detached curiosity. Say you are sick of working from home all day, with endless Zoom meetings and no real human contact. Rather than fantasizing about quitting, spend some time dissecting your boredom and discomfort. At what time of day are they worst? How long into a meeting does your desire to run away screaming well up? Keep a journal of when you are feeling low, with respect to time and task. Then consider how you might alter minor aspects of your routine to raise your mood. Following this procedure during the coronavirus pandemic shutdowns, I started taking virtual meetings while out for a walk. It made a big difference.

2. Accept your feelings.

The idea that you need to change your circumstances if you're sad is based on the assumption that your negative feelings should be eradicated. In many cases, negative emotions can be debilitating and can require treatment, as in the cases of depression or clinical anxiety. But in much of life, negative feelings are part of a full human experience; erasing them would make life grayer. Furthermore, ample research shows that negative emotions and experiences help us find life's meaning and purpose.

In the journal you started in Step 1 above, ponder the things that you can't realistically alter and the emotions they spark in you. Ask what you are learning about yourself from each of these feelings, and how you might grow as a result.

3. Lower your expectations.

Once, as a young man, I told my father over the phone that I planned to quit my job. “Why?” he asked. “Because it doesn’t make me happy,” I told him. He paused for a long time, and finally said, “What makes you so special?” My problem—and it’s a common one—was that I had set unreasonable expectations about how happy the world was supposed to make me.

Calmly ask yourself whether you’re asking the world for something it can’t or won’t give you. If you are, you might be looking in the wrong place for your bliss. For example, I am a big believer in creating happier workplaces, but I constantly advise people not to rely on a particular job for happiness. Similarly, you shouldn’t assume that all your happiness can come from any single romance, material object, or activity. You need a “portfolio” approach, balancing faith or philosophy, family, friendship, and work in which you earn your success and serve others.

4. Give more.

Research from the INSEAD business school in France shows that people who consider themselves a victim of circumstances don’t feel like they have any responsibility for them. They are also likely to be victimizers themselves, hurting the people who try to help them. One way to break this cycle is to help others voluntarily and charitably. Not only is serving others one of the most effective ways to raise one’s own happiness; maintaining the two opposing ideas that you are both a victim and a helper is very difficult.

If you are lonely at work, look for someone who might also be suffering and provide some good company. If you are struggling with your health, find others who are in the same boat and offer them a sympathetic ear and a helping hand. In lifting up others, you lift up yourself too.

Boethius, who reminded us that everyone suffers, knew a thing or two about problems. In fact, he wrote the words I quoted above from a prison cell while awaiting execution in A.D. 524 after being accused of treason by the Ostrogothic King Theodoric—a crime of which he was likely not guilty, but for which he was ultimately executed.

Boethius could not change his appalling circumstances. However, he could and did change his attitude toward them. “So true is it that nothing is wretched, but thinking makes it so,” he wrote, “and conversely every lot is happy if borne with equanimity.” To take this to heart and act on it is one of the greatest secrets to increased well-being, but it doesn’t have to be a secret. If Boethius could do it, so can you.

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