



Stay Positive at Work, at Home and at Play!

by CLAUDETTE COOMBS

Life runs so much more smoothly when we are well rested, less stressed and feeling positive. Conversely, if any of those conditions are not in order, we tend to react more negatively in any challenging situation. This is due in part to the fact that when we feel well, we have more mental energy to address things that deviate from our plans. It can also be due to the influence of our genetic design.

Often individuals comment on their tendency to look at the darker side by saying: “it’s just the way I am”; or, by referencing genetics as their reason for not being more optimistic. Aside from accepting this approach to life as a gift from our ancestors, we can also look at the impact of our environment on influencing our attitude and perspective on life.

It’s all in Your Head!

Speaking from a neuro-biological sense, the belief that “it’s just the way I am”, is an accurate depiction of the brain’s response. We are hard-wired to respond in certain ways. Some of these structural components of the brain were formed according to our genetically dictated design. Others were created in response to our environmental nurturing. These behavioural responses are then strengthened by repetition.

However, if this describes you, don’t give up yet! It is possible for us to create a more positive response to negative life events by changing our brain.

By actually paying attention to our behaviour and choosing to behave differently, we can reprogram our brain to function differently. With practice, this deliberate focus creates structural changes which support new behavioural responses.

This knowledge gives great opportunity for personal improvement. We can treat each observance of unsatisfactory behaviour as a chance to retrain our brain and permanently modify our behaviour. *Awareness* and *Deliberate Focus* are the initial steps to modifying our brain chemistry and structure and thereby creating a new frame of reference for our behaviour. (Contact me for a list of great reading resources.)

Creating a Positive Life ... at Play

Let’s take the easiest scenario first. The word “play” generally implies having fun. It suggests a time and setting where we are mentally free of significant stressors and allow ourselves to “feel good”. We engage in thoughts or activities that give us pleasure and make us smile. This behaviour has an effect on the brain’s chemistry causing the release of chemicals which enhance positive feelings and perpetuate our sense of well-being.

The upcoming summer break provides the ideal opportunity to recover from a demanding school year and to start retraining our brains to support healthy routines.

Step One: When we pay attention, or someone draws our attention, to behaviours we want to change, we have achieved the first step to identifying problematic thinking.

Step Two: When we focus on the new thought or behaviour, the brain begins to see this as a reality. New neuron pathways are created which support the desired reaction. With increased awareness and focus, plus the repetition of the associated behaviours, these brain pathways become the preferred ones.

If we use the summer to model healthy thoughts and behaviours, it will be easier to continue these, even when other stressors appear.

... at Home

Although this realm of our lives has many inherent challenges, it should also be a place of comfort and security. The extra workload, family expectations and relationship considerations provide us with endless opportunities to practice retraining our brains. The relative comfort and security of home frees some mental space to focus on emotional and social tasks.

If we maintain awareness of our mental and physical state, we are in a position to prevent negativity from causing damage to ourselves or others. This early detection system allows us to recognize and

focus on how we are feeling, then decide to change any obstacles to positive thinking.

Remaining positive at home involves a combination of personal and social factors. We choose how we internally address our thoughts and feelings and this choice creates a predisposition to how we interact socially. By taking the time to consider the impact of our conversations and actions, we can also choose to alter the way we interact with others.

If we practice using the radio concept of the 7-second time delay (time between when we think of something and actually say it out loud), we can avoid many potentially negative communications. If we think carefully before we speak, we can re-evaluate our message and delivery. The content is one communication component that can be mitigated or exaggerated by our tone, volume and body language.

If we have become stuck in unhealthy action and reaction patterns, we can review those behaviours and choose to change those to more positive interaction modes.

... at Work

Now we face what could be the greatest challenge – staying positive at work! Here we have physical, mental and intellectual demands which can be overwhelming. We encounter, not only our personal responses, but also those of the colleagues, students, administrators and parents with whom we have daily contact.

We have all seen how a small group, among a full staff, has the ability to change the atmosphere of a room, for better or worse! By studying social intelligence with its neural circuitry and supporting endocrine systems, we can better understand how this happens. However, just as we need not be an engineer or a mechanic to know how to use a car; likewise, we need not be neurologists, geneticists or biochemists to know how to make good use of our brain power. We only need awareness of the potential and knowledge of the practical strategies.

Our brains receive, interpret and respond to information from others with whom we are interacting. Just as musicians in an orchestra or synchronized swimmers are able to function in harmony with the others, so we are capable of using our social intelligence to enhance our collective well-being.

We know that even one person's bad mood or poor attitude can infect a room and drain the energy from individuals present. Each of us also knows colleagues who bring joy to any setting and we are pleased to be in their company. By attending to the emotions that we feel and then display, we can work to change those which are negative or those which

counter personal, and group, productivity and well-being. As we repeatedly practice the more helpful thoughts and behaviours, our brains fix those pathways permanently in its physical structure. Since our adult brains are always changing, we have the capacity to create new pathways that benefit our personal and social lives.

It is evident through research that we have the capacity to change who we have become as a result of the biologic impact of our genetics and our environment. If we are at all interested in becoming or remaining healthy, it is also imperative that we choose to use that capacity to improve our collective well-being.

Now is the time for us to use our minds to redirect the unhealthy brain pathways that we have incorporated into our brain's physical structure. In a nutshell, focus on the positive and take action to create that positive internal and external environment!

Claudette Coombs is a coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for Teachers. For confidential assistance contact Claudette Coombs (ext. 242) or Judy Beranger (ext. 265).