

FINDING THE POSITIVE IN ME

by Claudette (Boyd) Coombs

Feeling positively is more than just being in the presence of positive company otherwise we might believe the opposite, that being in the presence of negativity requires us to be negative also! To become a more positive person calls for definite action. We may need to learn new skills but, at the very least, we must begin to think differently.

Why "Negativity" Grows

The Bible suggests that "the rain will fall on the good and the bad". And guess what? That's true. If we go through life expecting that we will always be rewarded with good for good, then we are setting ourselves up for disappointment. There are times when bad things happen and we respond, quite naturally, by feeling badly. Depending on the magnitude and frequency of the "bad things" we may not recover well and we may begin a downward spiral of negative emotions. At times we may even decide to stay on that negative pathway because it is safer to lower our expectations than to hope for positive change and then be faced with more pain and disappointment. We choose to protect ourselves by accepting the bad as the norm but this limits the amount of "good" that we allow ourselves to feel, believe in, hope for, or even see in the world around us.

We can each look around our sphere of friends and acquaintances to see examples of people who have succumbed to negativity and those who have learned resilience. Negativity grows because, in the face of repeated "bad things", and without the support or skills to do otherwise, we eventually give up hope.

What to do in the presence of "Negativity"

Negative things will and do happen to all of us. When these things are isolated short-term events or situations, we find it relatively easy to believe that there is light at the end of the tunnel (even when we know that it will be a struggle to get to the light). This is a normal response. However, the situation calls for assertive action when we are over-exposed to negative talk, beliefs or actions. If we focused our daily news attention on threats of war, famine, social injustices, murders and natural disasters, we would quickly develop a dismal picture of our world. However, watching the evening news and receiving stories of local "heroes", successful Newfoundland and Labrador businesses, and communities working together to help people in need revives our belief that there is good in the world. Sometimes we just need to shut off the negative stories until we have a balance of the positive. When surrounded by negativity, we can take action to enhance our resistance:

- Protect yourself. This is your top priority. You don't need to fall into the pit and get stuck there or help to make it deeper and darker.
- Reinterpret the situation by filling in the missing information with a positive explanation, then creating a new personal reality. E.g. If a colleague snaps a cynical remark to your creative suggestion at a staff meeting, briefly imagine the kinds of "bad things" that happened to him/her to create that kind of reaction. Then believe that explanation and move on with your creativity.
- Accept negatives as temporary, restricted happenings with varied contributing factors. Today's front page headlines are transient. Tomorrow they will be replaced with something new. If we choose to accept negatives as permanent and pervasive, we encourage the personal development of chronic negativity.
- Increase awareness of personal communications styles in ourselves and others. Learn to recognize and avoid negative verbal and non-verbal language.

How to create personal "Positivity"

In creating an atmosphere of "positivity" around ourselves our goal is to challenge our own attitudes, expectations, response patterns and approach to dealing with daily living. We need not be concerned with taking on the responsibility of changing the beliefs, attitudes or behaviours of others (actually it is very unlikely that we could do that no matter how hard we tried). If we want or expect change in a situation, or if we would like a different reaction from others, it is up to us to begin the process. A teacher recently enlightened me with this simple piece of wisdom: "Why do we expect a different result when we keep doing things the same way?" The following steps can start us on the pathway of doing things differently and finally achieving different results.

- The first step is to explore the things that are keeping us where we are. Many times this results from things we

learned from childhood and have continued to reinforce. E.g. We know we are overwhelmed with necessary and optional commitments but we can't seem to give up that volunteer committee. Is it because we adopted the belief that we "should finish what we start"? How about our judgement of a colleague who doesn't work as hard as we do? Maybe we are holding onto the belief that we "should settle for nothing less than our best" and everyone else must be judged by our standards.

- Next, use every situation which generates negative feelings as an opportunity to identify personal triggers. Then begin the process of reinterpreting these triggers.
- Acknowledge the potential for unwanted consequences and prepare for the possibility, then continue to focus on the positive.
- Enhance the potential for positive results. Adopt attitudes and behaviours which highlight the positive and encourage that in others.
- Choose to associate with the positive in your leisure reading, socializing, and daily interactions. The positive approach will become the most familiar and automatic response over time.
- Catch someone "doing good". Then start changing your perception of that person or situation. If we expect negative, we are sure to find it or we will keep looking until we do. Practice the opposite.

Points to Remember

- Each person experiences a reality which is unlike that of the neighbour.
- Absolute truth, if there is any such thing, is not as significant as interpretation of the "truth" when you are considering personal impact.
- Past experiences can predispose us to biased interpretations.
- It is possible to see or believe things differently from someone else and neither person is "wrong". Is "being right" the most important thing? At what expense and to whom?
- Recognize that we don't live in an ideal world with ideal relationships and that if we continue to expect that ideal we become more frustrated and dissatisfied with the real world.
- Dissatisfaction with the imperfect can be a driving force for improvement but, where we have no control, unrealistic expectations can lead to contagious cynicism and chronic negativity.

When bad things happen in one area of life we sometimes let that infiltrate other areas of life so that eventually our personal lives, relationships and job are all affected. Keeping negativity in check is a task we can't afford to ignore. We are all susceptible to harm because we cannot predict what's coming around the next turn; however, we can minimize the negative impact by preparing our personal strategy for dealing with negatives and continuously practicing the positive.

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