

Video 9: Positive Mindset

The next habit we're going to talk about is how to cultivate positive emotions, or should we say, a positive mindset. My favorite quote for this topic comes from the Roman philosopher, Epictetus, who said, "What concerns us is not the way things actually are, but rather the way we think things are."

This quote reminds me of John Lennon's famous statement, "It's all in the mind."

John Lennon probably plagiarized Buddha and the Hindu philosophers who, long ago, claimed that mental training has an enormous impact on how we deal with the ups and downs of life.

We have a choice. Viktor Frankl insisted that, no matter what the situation, we always have the freedom to choose how we'll react. That is the ultimate freedom, that cannot be taken away from us.

That choice is a key component of Positive Psychology. If we want to be happier, there are three kinds of emotions that we should choose to focus on:

One of them is gratitude, which is related to the past, the second is savoring or appreciation, which is related to the present moment, and, the third is hope, which is related to the future.

I still love Winnie the Pooh, who seems to know the secret of positive emotions. Here he is peacefully looking down a well, at the expanding ripples of water.

I like to imagine that he is experiencing the three kinds of positive emotions that we spoke about.

So perhaps he is feeling grateful for the friends that he has, such as Piglet, Tigger, Owl, and the rest of the gang.

Or he could be savoring the present moment, gazing at the gentle ripples in the water, as they slowly expand outwards. Or he could be thinking about the future, he could be hopeful that he's about to go and find some honey, or that he's about to visit Owl, and wish him a happy Thursday.

The bottom line is that there are three kinds of emotion, related to the past, present, and future, that have a powerful impact on our sense of well-being.

Martin Seligman launched his whole theory of authentic happiness based on an experiment about gratitude. He asked his volunteers to write down a brief reflection, at the end of each day, about three things that went well and the reason why they went well.

The second experiment he carried out was about expressing gratitude. The volunteers were asked to write a letter thanking someone who had shown kindness, that they had not recognized enough.

These two exercises, writing letters of gratitude, and recalling three things daily, had an amazingly large impact on people that lasted for months.

Frankly speaking, I was a little skeptical about the long term results of the gratitude experiments, so I asked my class to try the letter writing exercise.

One student said she couldn't do it because she couldn't think of anyone to thank. She had a very difficult life.

To my surprise, a few days later, she had completed the assignment, and she wanted to tell us about the result.

She was very angry with her father, who hadn't expressed love for her as long as she could remember. But while she was thinking about the assignment, she suddenly realized that, behind the scenes,

her silent, frosty father had worked day and night to support her university education.

So she wrote a letter thanking him for his support and dedication. A few days later she received a call from father. He had read the letter, but he was so emotional about it he could hardly talk. For the first time in her whole life, she could hear her father crying. The relationship between father and daughter was transformed by one letter of gratitude.

As we mentioned earlier on, the mathematics of kindness is very strange. A small action can trigger something much bigger, like the butterfly in Brazil that flapped its wings, and caused a tornado in Texas. A small act of gratitude can, in the same way, literally change someone's life.

The next positive emotion is appreciation for the present moment, what Seligman calls savoring, that originally comes from “savour “ in French, which means taste. If you recall, we talked about the Pleasant Life, the Engaged Life and the Meaningful Life.

Savoring, smelling the flowers, is the secret of the first stage, the Pleasant Life. We're so busy rushing around like chickens without heads, that we forget to enjoy the present moment. Did you stop and think how tasty your breakfast was today? Or did you feel the breeze on your way to work?

The whole idea of smelling the flowers didn't begin with Seligman. It's very closely related to the Buddhist concept of mindfulness, which was originally inspired by Hinduism.

When we're talking about mindfulness, we're not really talking about an emotion. We're talking about complete immersion in the present moment. There is a famous story about mindfulness, called “The Tiger and the Strawberry.”

A farmer is so busy working in the fields, he doesn't realize that nighttime is falling. Suddenly he sees a tiger approaching, so he runs away like the wind.

Coming to a precipice, he grabs a wild vine and swings down over the edge. Trembling, he looks up, and sees the tiger roaring above him. So he looks down to find a foothold, but right below him another tiger is waiting on a ledge with big, open jaws. The vine is his only protection. Suddenly, two mice begin to eat away at the vine. The man pauses a moment, and sees a tiny wild strawberry growing right next to him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he picks the strawberry with the other and eats it. How sweet it tastes!

What on Earth does the story mean? Has the farmer gone crazy!

Instead of thinking about the tigers, the farmer makes up his mind to enjoy the present moment and eat the strawberry. This famous story is a dramatic illustration about how stressful human life is, and how to deal with that stress.

The tiger looking at the farmer from the top of the cliff is the tiger of the past and the tiger waiting for him on the ledge below, is the tiger of the future.

Most people are getting chased by at least one tiger. Some of us tend to get chased by the tiger of the past. We tend to think over and over about bad things that happened, or mistakes that we did in the past, that fill us with regret or anger.

Or perhaps you are getting chased by the tiger of the future.

Perhaps you are wondering if that tiny spot on your nose is skin cancer.

Or you're wondering about how you can pay off your enormous debt.

We are so preoccupied by the two tigers, that we don't smell the flowers.

Which tiger is running after you right now?

The tiger of the past or the tiger of the future?

Or are you completely focused on this video? This video is the strawberry!

OK, so maybe it's not as nice as a strawberry, but I think you get the point. Happiness is now, not yesterday or tomorrow.

The third kind of emotion that needs to be cultivated is the feeling of hope about the future.

A lack of hope or despair is very closely connected to serious depression.

One great way of cultivating hope is to set meaningful goals that we can look forward to.

Finally, I should mention that the scientific evidence about positive emotions is a little ambiguous. Do happy people feel positive emotions more easily or does it work the opposite way around? Do positive emotions generate happiness?

We don't exactly know what the cause-effect relationship is, but most likely, it works both ways.

So let's review.

The cultivation of positive emotions is a key to our well-being.

Positive Psychology focuses on three kinds of positive emotion: gratitude about the past, savoring the present moment, which is closely related to mindfulness, and hope about the future.

Gratitude can be cultivated in many different ways, two of the most effective being daily reflection on three things we're grateful for, or expressing gratitude, especially towards people that we may not have appreciated enough.

Savoring and appreciation are cultivated by focusing on the present moment, in other words eating the strawberry in front of us, and not getting distracted by the two tigers.

Finally, one way of cultivating hope is by setting meaningful and constructive goals that we can aim for and look forward to.