

From Hopeless to Happy

If life could be graded, Anthony would give his an F. His new job is stressful, his teenage daughter is struggling with depression, he and his wife are fighting a lot lately, and he hates himself for the extra 50 pounds he's carrying.

Anthony feels hopeless and his life seems depressing and dark. Every setback reinforces his pessimism and

grim certainty that nothing will ever get better.

Barbara's struggles seem just as daunting. Her husband just lost his job two months after the birth of their first child. She is responsible for her elderly mother, who is becomingly increasingly frail. To make things worse, her best friend and main support is moving to another state and the landlord just raised the rent by \$200. Despite all this, Barbara gives her life a strong B+ and knows there are some A+ days ahead.

Unlike Anthony, Barbara sees her setbacks as *temporary obstacles* to be overcome. To her, crises are part of life, opportunities for her to gain in wisdom and courage.

Put simply, some people are optimists and others are pessimists. However, optimism isn't an accident—it's a skill that can be learned, one that can help us feel better, resist depression and greatly improve our lives.

Psychologist, clinical researcher and bestselling author Martin Seligman has spent 25 years studying optimism and pessimism. In his book, *Learned Optimism*, he states that pessimistic thinking can undermine not just our behavior but our success in all areas of our lives.

"Pessimism is escapable," he writes. "Pessimists can learn to be optimists."

By altering our view of our lives, we can actually alter our lives, he says. First, he says we must recognize our "explana-

tory style," which is what we say to ourselves when we experience a setback. By breaking the "I give up" pattern of thinking and changing our interior negative dialogue, we can encourage what he calls "flexible optimism." He believes that

**"Hope' is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tunes without the words
And never stops—at all." —Emily Dickinson**

focusing on our innate character strengths (wisdom, courage, compassion), rather than our

perceived failures, boosts not just our moods, but our immune system. Research has shown that optimistic people tend to be healthier and experience more success in life; therefore, he encourages parents to develop the patterns of optimism in their children.

Practicing "spiritual optimism" is another way to improve the quality of our lives, writes Joan Borysenko, psychologist, speaker and author of several books, including *Fire in the Soul*. She encourages people who experience feelings of despair and hopelessness in times of crises to remember it takes courage to live, and that we can find that courage by facing our fears, finding support and using prayer or meditation.

Similar techniques outlined by Dr. David Burns in his book *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*, have been effective in treating depression. He believes that changing our thinking has a profound effect on our moods, including cases of severe depression. It's not our lives that depress us, he writes, but our thinking about our lives.

So unless Anthony begins to change his thinking, his life's outlook may remain bleak and dismal. Barbara, however, is likely to graduate to even more satisfying and fulfilling years ahead because she believes her life is filled with challenges and opportunities. ■

10 Actions That Say "I Love You"

The saying, "Words are cheap, actions speak," is never more true than when applied to "I love you." Whether spoken to a romantic partner, your children or other family members, if the actions aren't there to back up the loving words, it all means nothing. Below are 10 of the best ways to say "I love you" in your actions. But there are thousands more. See how creative you can get in coming up with your own ideas.

- 1. Greet your loved ones with a big smile, a hug and a kiss.**
- 2. Really listen to what your loved ones are saying.** Give them your undivided and undistracted attention.
- 3. Support each other through tough times.**
- 4. Do simple (even random) acts of kindness.** Massage shoulders or feet, cook a favorite meal, run a bath.
- 5. Spend one-on-one time with your loved ones.** Lose the agenda, and just hang out.
- 6. Come home on time.** Sober.
- 7. Be impeccable with your word.** If you say you'll do something, do it, and by the time you said you'd do it.
- 8. Step out of the blame game.** Take responsibility for your part in any conflict. Look at how you can do better next time.
- 9. Share yourself and what lives deeply inside of you.** This is a precious gift and conveys trust and security.
- 10. Commit to truly accepting each other's faults.** ■

A Letter From Yvonne Blockie M.A. MFT



Hopelessness can be truly debilitating to those in its grasp. It undermines success in all areas of our lives and enforces a doom-and-gloom mentality that can feed depression, negative self-talk and a sense of being a victim. The good news, as the page 1 feature notes, is that it is possible to unlearn pessimistic patterns, to change our thinking to more helpful optimism.

The Top 10 suggests actions to take (that we might overlook on a day-to-day basis) that say "I love you" in a far deeper way than the words themselves. This issue's quiz allows you to test the level of stress that exists in your family, to see whether you could use support in lowering it. Sometimes we don't recognize the stress that has developed in our homes until something or someone explodes.

The page 3 feature looks at the sting of criticism. It pokes a hole in our illusion that we are perfect. It points out our flaws and failures. Yet, as the article reveals, there is another way of understanding criticism, a way that transforms the sting to possibility.

Finally, the back page article suggests ways to deal with all the little or big things that we tolerate, depleting the energy we could be using to make desired changes or to simply experience joy in our life.

May your spring blossom with hope and new possibility.

Family Stress Test

Stress is a natural and normal "by-product" of every family's life. In fact, family stress can bring out the best of us: as we stretch to meet the challenges we face, we become better parents, our children blossom and our families grow. But too much stress can spiral our families in the other direction. Take this Thriving test to see how your family fares.



True False Set 1

- 1. There is a lot of bickering in our house. Someone is always angry at someone else.
- 2. There's never enough time to sit down together, either to talk or to eat. There's always too much to do.
- 3. My spouse and I argue a lot about how to raise the children.
- 4. It's like pulling teeth to get the kids to help around the house.
- 5. Our family has experienced a lot of significant change recently (divorce, death, blended family, job loss, illness, other trauma).
- 6. Money is very tight. My partner and I have constant conflicts about how to spend it.
- 7. My child has been having behavior problems at school.
- 8. The children get upset when they hear us arguing.
- 9. I work too much, and it's really getting to me.
- 10. We don't really talk about hard issues; we just hold our breath and wait, hoping they will go away.

Set 2

- 1. We acknowledge feelings, encourage their expression and allow time for dealing with the issues these feelings raise.
- 2. We plan time for family activities. And we eat together at least once every day.
- 3. If a blended family, we maintain and nurture original parent-child relationships and let new relationships develop in their own time.
- 4. I feel confident in my role as parent.
- 5. Our family easily maintains a sense of humor and playfulness.
- 6. Family priorities take precedence over work.
- 7. I know what's important to my kids.
- 8. When issues arise that we get stuck on, we ask for help from other family members, support groups, community-based programs, clergy and/or a therapist.
- 9. We have enough money for the important things.
- 10. Everyone in the family has responsibilities around the house and does them without being nagged.

If you answered true more often in the first set than in the second set, you may want to seek help to lower the stress level of your family. Families that communicate about problems, who face issues as they arise, who support one another and seek help when it is needed, can build strong bonds among themselves, nurture a healthy and loving family and have a lot more fun doing it!

Accepting the "Gift" of Criticism

Most of us can accept compliments. Some of us can accept suggestions. One or two of us can bend our minds around a completely new idea.

But when it comes to criticism, that's where most of us shut the door and hang up the "closed" sign. After all, who wants to hear the sentences that begin with, "You want to know what your problem is?" or "If only you would change (fill in the blank) about yourself"?

Few people learn how to accept (or give) criticism gracefully as they are growing up. Many may have been criticized harshly or told things for their "own good" that were hurtful rather than helpful. We learn to dread anything that seems judgmental or critical.

Yet, if we can learn to truly listen to criticism about ourselves, we open the door to possibility. Learning to accept and use criticism can be one of the most constructive and profound tools to change ourselves and improve our relationships with others. Not only can we learn more about who we are and how others see us, but we may also learn that it's okay not to be perfect. And, as a bonus, we may learn that people will love us anyway, warts and all.

Criticism as Opportunity

Bernie Siegel, author and physician writes that criticism is an opportunity to become a better person. "When you feel inadequate or imperfect, criticism is threatening and makes you feel that you have to defend yourself. When you are secure—not perfect, but secure—you can listen to the criticism and consider its value."

Byron Katie, author of *Loving What Is*, calls criticism "a powerful tool for self-realization and growth." She suggests that when we are criticized for being wrong, unkind, uncaring, etc., we should ask ourselves if the criticism is true. If we can accept the truth without stress or pain, we free ourselves from trying to hide who we are from others. We know our faults and we accept them and, therefore, criticism from others cannot hurt us. "When you are genuinely humble, there is no place for criticism to stick," she writes.

Learning from Our Children

Parents are often among the most criticized group of people. Their parenting choices are targeted by relatives,

other parents, strangers and parenting "experts." And when their children are old enough to speak, they join in the chorus! But of all the voices, it may be our children who offer us the most valuable criticism because they see us at our most vulnerable and unguarded. Children—especially teens—will tell us exactly what they think, in unadorned, sometimes painfully honest, language. If we are able as

parents to drop our authority roles and our belief that we know better because we are older/wiser/better, we can learn some awe-inspiring truths about ourselves. (And yes, it will hurt at times!) By doing this, we also model the art of accepting criticism—a valuable skill for our children as they grow up.



Questions to Ask Yourself

Don Powell, Ph.D, of the American Institute for Preventive Medicine writes that sometimes criticism—the right kind of criticism—is just what we need to make important changes. In an AIPM handbook,

Dr. Powell outlines the following questions to ask yourself when working with criticism:

- Does the criticism seem reasonable? Is there some truth to what was said? (Perhaps you should pay attention to the remark.)
- Have I been criticized by other people on the same issue? (If so, maybe it warrants attention.)
- Does the person making the critical remark know what he or she is talking about? (If he or she is a self-appointed critic-at-large, ignore the remark.)
- Was the remark really directed at me, or was the critic venting general frustration, anger, or bitterness at something over which I have no control? (If criticism stems from general dissatisfaction, let it slide.)
- Is the criticism based on a difference of opinion? (If so, don't overreact.)

Once you decide that there is some truth to the criticism, you are on the path to taking positive steps to make changes in your behavior or outlook. Being able to hear and absorb criticism without anger or defensiveness helps make the path that much smoother. ■

"Tolerations" Take a Toll

What do a boss who's always yelling at you, your mate's over-spending habits, a cluttered house or office, tight shoulders and a ho-hum (or bad) relationship have in common?

They're all *tolerations*, those little or big things we put up with—often without realizing it—that sap our energy and drain our life force. Every time we tolerate something, we deplete the energy we could be using to make desired changes or to simply experience joy in our life. It's like living with a low-grade fever or pain that somehow dulls our experience and zaps our full vitality.

*Ughhh. He's late again—and stoned. Zap!
I hate it when she treats me like that. Zap!
Overdrawn again. Zap!*

At the root of our tolerations are a variety of limiting beliefs that immobilize us. For example: "That's just the way it is." "I'm not worth it." "Don't rock the boat—play it safe." "Don't complain or be



too demanding." "I don't have enough time/money/support."

There are countless limiting beliefs, yet they all serve to dampen our life force and keep us playing small. And, boy, are they exhausting!

If we are committed to feeling better about ourselves, to making changes that will bring us greater peace of mind and happiness, it will greatly help to evaluate and eliminate the tolerations standing in our way. Here are some ideas on how to do that:

Appraise. Make an honest appraisal of what you are tolerating in each of the areas of your life: home environ-

ment, health, work, money, relationships and so on. Write down *everything* that annoys you or that you feel you are putting up with. You will likely come up with more than 100!

Evaluate. Examine each underlying limited belief that has kept you putting up with these things. Again, get support to help you break through them. You may be so close to some of these beliefs that you

can't fully recognize them for what they are.

Appreciate. Take an honest look at what you are getting out of keeping things as they are. There is *always* some kind of payoff for whatever is going on in your life. Who in your life—or what part of you—does *not* want things to change? Appreciate that person or part, and look for ways for it to be win-win for all concerned.

Choose. Based on your values and goals, *you* get to choose. What will you say "no" to? "Yes?" Make sure the "yeses" *really* excite you and the no's are clear. Commit to making them real!

Plan. With the support of friends, family or your therapist, develop a strategy for eliminating these tolerations or figuring out

how to work with them. You don't have to do it alone—in fact, it's useful and helpful to partner up or create a support team.

As you begin to work with these tolerations, you will

feel the joy of being at choice, an increase in your vitality and a sense of empowerment. Then *YOU* will be in the driver's seat of your life...and won't that be a beautiful and worthwhile ride! ■

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

—Reinhold Niebuhr

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