

The beginning of positive thinking



From our guest contributor Michael Josephson, founder of CHARACTER COUNTS!

I am a strong believer in the power of positive thinking, which is the title of a best-selling book published in 1952 by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, a controversial preacher and pastor who popularized the idea that if you can change your attitude, you can change your life. He urged people to consciously train themselves to be optimistic and enthusiastic, to believe in themselves, to refuse to dwell on negative thoughts, and to visualize success. He also vigorously advocated forgiveness, gratitude, and building one's own character.

Who could argue with that? Apparently, the entire psychiatric community. His theories evoked universal criticism from psychiatrists, who labeled his advice shallow, simplistic, and possibly dangerous. They believed that, ultimately, those who tried his methods would end up disillusioned and worse off than before. He was labeled a confidence man and a charlatan.

I was surprised to discover that even Dr. Martin Seligman, the father of the “Positive Psychology” movement in 1998, nearly a half century after Dr. Peale’s book, vociferously sought to distinguish “positive thinking” from “positive psychology.” He called positive thinking an “unproven and dangerous” armchair activity.

Certainly these are legitimate concerns that some people might be so taken by the “self-hypnosis” of positive thinking that they foolishly or naively ignore risks and deny demonstrable negative realities, but these concerns are no better documented than Dr. Peale’s claims. In fact, Dr. Seligman and his colleagues launched scientific research proving the huge value of positive attitudes and optimism in producing happiness and mental well-being.

Perhaps Dr. Peale oversold his theories, but millions of people believe that his message gave them a new strategy that made them happier and more successful. Clearly, extreme unreflective optimism can mask risks that need to be considered by prudent people, but I suspect more people suffer because of negativism than optimism.

Even today, I find these Peal-isms appealing and useful:

- If life gives you lemons, make lemonade.
- Imagination is the true magic carpet.
- It’s always too early to quit.
- Success consists not in fighting battles, but in avoiding them. A masterly retreat is itself a victory.
- The trouble with most of us is that we would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism.
- We’ve all heard that we have to learn from our mistakes, but I think it’s more important to learn from successes. If you learn only from your mistakes, you are inclined to learn only errors.
- Action is a great builder of confidence. . . . Any action is better than no action at all.

- Any fact facing us is not as important as our attitude toward it, for that determines our success or failure. The way you think about a fact may defeat you before you ever do anything about it. You are overcome by the fact because you think you are.
- Don't take tomorrow to bed with you.
- Formulate and stamp indelibly on your mind a mental picture of yourself as succeeding. Hold this picture tenaciously. Never permit it to fade. Your mind will seek to develop the picture. . . Do not build up obstacles in your imagination.
- Getting people to like you is merely the other side of liking them.
- Repetition of the same thought or physical action develops into a habit which, repeated frequently enough, becomes an automatic reflex.
- Stand up to your obstacles and do something about them. You will find that they haven't half the strength you think they have.
- The more you lose yourself in something bigger than yourself, the more energy you will have.
- There is a real magic in enthusiasm. It spells the difference between mediocrity and accomplishment.
- We struggle with the complexities and avoid the simplicities.
- We tend to get what we expect.

How do you stay positive?

Learn more about character education.