Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

A Positive Attitude… It’s Contagious!

Motivational writers such as Norman Vincent Peale have been telling us for years that a positive outlook can make people more successful in life. Positive thinking may be more powerful than even Peale realized. According to research conducted by psychologists in the late '80's, good health and the ability to overcome stress are also linked to a positive attitude.



What is Attitude?

On the surface, it could be described as the disposition we display to others. Elwood N. Chapman, author of Attitude: Your Most Priceless Possession, claims, "Attitude is a mind set. It is the way you look at things mentally." He goes on to observe, "A positive attitude is the outward manifestation of a mind that dwells primarily on positive matters."

Believe it or not, attitude is contagious. A positive attitude gives energy to you and to those around you. On the other hand, a negative attitude drains your energy and the energy of those with whom you come in contact.

It's really not surprising that many people have a negative attitude, when you consider that negative statements are all around us. One study being quoted by Charles Thompson in his book, What a Great Idea!, revealed that, at home, parents utter 18 negative statements for every positive one, usually to an inquisitive child who wants to know how something works. The average is 432 negative statements per day! None of us can be unaware that negative stories in the media far outnumber the positive ones.

On a scale of negative one to positive ten, how would you rate your attitude toward your job and toward your life? If you rated yourself on the lower half of the scale, you may see shades of yourself in these three scenarios:

Steve is a customer service representative for a large organization. Most of Steve's workday is devoted to dealing with customers over the phone. If Steve were to think about it, he would realize that at least 95 per cent of these customers are reasonable and pleasant people. However, Steve tends to dwell on the five per cent or less that he calls "difficult people." Unfortunately, Steve's negative attitude toward his job is affecting his wife and family.

Elaine and Bob are the naysayers that you occasionally find at a meeting. They shoot down every suggested idea. Elaine and Bob's typical responses are: "We tried that before." "We've always done it this way." "It can't be done." Seminar leader and author, Charles Thompson, label these negative responses "killer phrases." He believes that they can thwart creative efforts and reduce the likelihood of beneficial change.

Elaine and Bob's co-workers often say that the human race would still be living in caves if those two had their way. Although it is said jokingly, they are right in thinking that Elaine and Bob's negative attitudes stem from a reluctance to change.

Katy, an office supervisor, has allowed herself to get into a negative rut. Katy's conversation is a litany of complaints. Some days, people wonder if she ever says anything positive about anyone or anything. Unfortunately, Katy is unaware of her negative attitude.

What can these people in these scenarios—Steve, Elaine, Bob, and Katy—do to develop a more positive attitude?

All of them would benefit from taking a more positive picture of life. Elwood N. Chapman uses the analogy of a camera in his book, Attitude: Your Most Priceless Possession. "Think of attitude as your mental focus on the outside world," he says. "Like using a camera, you can focus or set your mind on what appeals to you. You can see situations as either opportunities or failures. A cold winter day as either beautiful or ugly. A departmental meeting as interesting or boring." He goes on to say, "Quite simply you take the picture of life you want to take."

Steve, the customer service representative, could put this advice into action by focusing on the pleasant customers with whom he talks, instead of those he deems "difficult people." Think how pleasantly surprised his wife and family would be if he replaced his grousing with some pleasant anecdotes.

To be fair to Elaine and Bob, negative thinkers can alert the overly optimistic to the pitfalls of a decision. However, this can be done in a cautionary manner, rather than by creating a negative atmosphere. The prospects for a more realistic decision are increased.

Katy's problem is a very common one. She has overlooked this one crucial factor in maintaining a balanced outlook on life: a positive attitude must be continually revitalized. Given her supervisory responsibilities, Katy needs to understand that her outlook could negatively affect the performance of her department.

How Can You Develop a More Positive Attitude?

Here, from the experts, is a roundup of tips worth considering:

1. **Give your appearance the attention it deserves.** Bear in mind that a negative self-image can lead to a negative attitude, while good grooming and clothes that are becoming, can lift your spirits and build your confidence.

2. **Monitor your self-talk.** Are you aware of the inner dialog you carry on with yourself during your waking hours? Do you say critical and negative things to yourself such as "I'm always making errors," or "That's just my luck," or "I'm no good at math?" The more frequently these negative thoughts are repeated, the stronger they become. The first step in overcoming negative self-talk is to become aware of it. The next step is to replace these self-defeating thoughts with positive and productive ones.

3. **Feed your mind positive thoughts.** Why not resolve to read at least one motivational or inspirational book each month? Or, if you prefer, listen to tapes that provide a positive message. You might find it helpful to write down on small cards certain positive thoughts that you find especially encouraging. Carry one of these cards with you each day and read it several times during the day.

4. **Change your vocabulary.** In his latest bestseller, Awaken the Giant Within, Anthony Robbins tells how he was able to lower the intensity of his anger by changing the words he used to describe his emotional state. Instead of saying he was "angry and upset," he chose to say, "I feel myself getting a 'bit peeved'."

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Robbins believes that our choice of words can not only lower the intensity of our negative emotions, but it can also intensify our positive emotions. For example, when someone asks how are you doing, instead of saying "all right," say "superb." Robbins suggests, "Notice the words you habitually use and replace them with ones that empower you."

5. **Keep a record of the positive things in your life.** If you like to keep a diary or journal, you may find it helpful to record positive things. Although your will want to record major events and accomplishments, it is also important to focus on the little, everyday things that bring you pleasure—having lunch with a friend, listening to a favorite song or taking a leisurely stroll in the park. In other words, use your journal to count your blessings.

6. **Let nature replenish your inner resources.** Even a few fleeting moments enjoying the beauty of a sunrise or a sunset, can give your spirits the lift they need.

7. **Share your positive attitude by encouraging others.** Never miss an opportunity to compliment people on their achievements, their work or their appearance.

8. **Vary your routine.** Probably, the most common way to add variety to life is to take a vacation. For most of us, a vacation is a once-a-year event. Our attitudes certainly need recharging more than once each year. Often, even small changes such as taking a new route to work, eating at a different restaurant or shopping in a store you've never been to, can make a difference. Tackling something new can also revitalize your attitude. If you have always wanted to learn Spanish, become a computer whiz or take up golf, decide right now to do it!

9. **Lighten up!** Seek out a comedy for that next movie or play or TV program. Ask your local library to help you compile a reading list of humorous books or look in the humor section of your favorite bookstore. You may also find it is fun to keep a scrapbook of humorous cartoons and sayings.

10. **Take time out for yourself on weekends.** Keep in mind what psychiatrist and author, Theodore I. Rubin advocates: "A day devoted to ourselves—no strings attached—can be a wonderful morale booster. This is not selfishness; it is just good mental health."

What all of these tips have in common is the recognition that attitude is not a mysterious force over which we have no control. It is a simple, but powerful fact, that one of the things over which each of us has control is our attitude.