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24 KARAT SUCCESS



GOLDEN RULES FOR A
FULFILLED AND SUCCESSFUL
LIFE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Karat 3: A glass half full lasts longer

The power of positive thinking

“Well sure, he can have my brain – what good is it to me when I’m six feet underground?” said one of the nuns. This was the decisive statement and starting point in 1986 for the so-called 'nun study'⁵⁵, which is still running more than 30 years later. To date almost 700 nuns, aged between 75 and 102, from the Order of the Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame in the US, have agreed to let the American doctor David Snowdon have their brains after their deaths. From the outset they were also willing to take physical and mental tests once a year and to give Snowdon an insight into their 'personal life reports' (which every young nun has to write at the age of about 20 before taking her vows). Snowdon was touched by the nuns' trust in him and set to work. The results of the study are fascinating. For example, not every nun whose brain had Alzheimer's-disease plaques suffered from cognitive impairment. Indeed, the brains of well-educated nuns apparently had ample reserves to think elegantly around the 'holes' caused by their illness. These nuns showed no Alzheimer's symptoms in everyday life, yet, when Dr Snowdon examined them shortly after they died, he found their brains were as riddled with holes as those of fellow nuns who knew neither what month it was nor the correct number of apostles. Perhaps the most interesting insight from Snowdon's study, though, is that nuns whose 'personal life reports' contained many positive feelings lived considerably longer than those who had written in a purely neutral way.

It is widely understood that positive thinking and feeling is good for us. There is much research evidence to support this. Here is an example. Some 157 healthy volunteers are exposed to influenza viruses through a nasal spray. The clear result: The more positive the volunteers are about their lives, the less they become ill. The sadder, more nervous and dissatisfied they are, the more likely they are to get the flu.⁵⁶ The inescapable conclusion seems to be that sadness weakens the immune system, whereas a positive attitude to life requires fewer headache tablets and handkerchiefs.

Does this also apply to serious illnesses? If you suffer from heart disease or other chronic diseases, you should definitely focus on the positive, since there is a clear correlation with longer-term survival.⁵⁷ Why? Positive thinkers have lower blood pressure and fewer sites of inflammation in their bodies than people with a less positive outlook on life.⁵⁸ However, the correlation is not yet proven with cancer. Sadly, cancer patients with a positive attitude die just as quickly as those who think negatively. For people who are generally healthy, however, positive emotions statistically prolong life by four to ten years in comparison to people who think negatively.⁵⁹

Our attitude to life even determines our salary level. People who have had a positive attitude since they were children earn, on average, almost \$10,000 more a year than their grumpy siblings – and are much happier too.⁶⁰ A study among law students showed that those scoring just one point more on the optimism scale commanded (10 years later) an extra \$30,000 in annual salary more than their less optimistic peers.⁶¹

So, is it possible to *develop* a positive attitude to life? The answer is an unequivocal 'yes'. And quite easily – as the following experiment shows. Students were divided into three groups and each group was asked to write a paragraph about the past week for a period of ten weeks. Group 1 was to write about experiences that made them feel grateful, group 2 was to write about all the irritations of the previous week, and group 3 had to write neutrally about everything that had happened.⁶²

At the end of the ten weeks, the researchers sought to determine which of the three groups felt most contented. You can no doubt guess the result. It emerged very clearly that the students who had thought about what made them grateful felt considerably happier, healthier, more satisfied and more optimistic than their peers in the other two groups. What we can take from this is that nobody is trapped in their attitude; you can change your attitude using quite straightforward methods.

Another of these methods is being nice to people! One study showed that doing five 'nice' things for others on one day, every so often over a period of six weeks, makes the 'doer' measurably (42 percent more) happier than he was before!⁶³ What kind of 'nice things' are we talking about? Even small things will suffice – like topping up a stranger's

parking meter, visiting a sick relative or writing a note of thanks to a former teacher.

And being nice to yourself is as important as being nice to others if you want to increase your stock of happiness. Our inner dialogue is important here. People who are prone to depression tend to think more negative than positive things about themselves: “You stupid woman, you sat like a dumb fish again in that meeting” or “No wonder no woman wants me – I’m just too boring.”⁶⁴ Well-balanced, healthy people have a ratio of 1.6 positive to 1.0 negative thoughts and feelings. In depressed people the ratio is reversed: for every positive thought, they have at least 1.6 negative ones.

No one so far has counted how many thoughts a person has in a day, but assumptions range from 4,000⁶⁵ up to 70,000.⁶⁶ This makes even the 1.6:1.0 ratio in people thought to be psychologically healthy look pretty gloomy: by this token each of us would have at least 1,500 negative thoughts between waking up in the morning and falling asleep at night! It is therefore not surprising that optimism (and consequently fewer negative thoughts) and life happiness go hand in hand.⁶⁷ The lesson is clear – even reasonably healthy people would benefit from gradually shifting their thinking towards the more positive end of the scale.

But what if you just don't like yourself very much? Be inspired by the observation of US Professor Mitch Prinstein.⁶⁸ He prescribed that on two days a year his students must wear a brightly colored T-shirt bearing a bold slogan. His experiment had an incredible effect. Shy students were approached and suddenly felt full of self-confidence, while angry students no longer saw themselves as disagreeable outsiders, but as part of a likeable group. The students themselves approached people differently and experienced above-average positive moments! Call into the world positively and you will soon hear a positive echo.

If you look around you, you will see the power of positive thinking and feeling in many places. Consider the following story. “My husband had forgotten my birthday and I was very sad and angry. Then I remembered that I had forgotten our last wedding anniversary. Now I could say to my husband: ‘I was really hurt that you forgot my birthday, but I missed our wedding anniversary, and I know how hard it is to

remember when we are both busy. Why don't we change our plans for tonight and celebrate in a nice restaurant?"⁶⁹ Whoever manages from time to time to shift perspective in a relationship and, accordingly, act this wisely, creates a golden bridge for both parties.

Of course, positive thinking has its limits – particularly when there is no basis for it. The US author and columnist Barbara Ehrenreich rejects “imposed positive thinking.”⁷⁰ She warns, for example, that if someone is diagnosed with cancer, pretending everything will be fine is unwise: it could discourage them from taking their medication or undergoing vital surgery.

Let me give you another personal example. A good friend regularly complains about her son, who never studies, has no discipline and buries himself in computer games. At the end of every phone call, she concludes in a cheery voice that implies she sees no need for action: “Oh, I'm sure it will all turn out fine.”

This is not the kind of positive thinking that I'm advocating. Positive thinking is not about sugarcoating. If someone is facing bankruptcy, it would be absurd and irresponsible to think that everything will be all right again. What I try to encourage is the basic attitude that people can not only survive a difficult situation, but also learn from it and grow. Your life does not consist only of this single situation, but contains many other aspects that create value and joy. Let me illustrate this with the example of an acquaintance of mine. The owner of a small publishing house, he had not kept his books properly and was fined DM1m for fraudulent bankruptcy. Instead of burying his head in the sand, he set about raising this gigantic sum. He became even more creative, focused and flexible and paid the penalty in less than ten years. When I met him, he said – with a big smile on his face – that since he had now learned how to earn money he would simply continue with his strategy.

The attitude most likely to engender happiness is therefore to a) assess the situation realistically and b) see the positive side as much as the negative side.

Anyone familiar with the film 'It's a Wonderful Life', starring James Stewart, knows that a panicked focus on the current situation can lead to an even greater catastrophe. How wonderful for all of us if there is an angel could descend into our lives, point out all the good they

contain and help us put our crises into perspective! But, in fact, we *have* an angel in real life – and it's called positive thinking.

No one understood this better than the Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl. His experience in Auschwitz inspired his famous book *Man's Search for Meaning*.⁷¹ Objectively, being incarcerated in a concentration camp offers scant cause for optimism. But Frankl found reason to believe that, despite the horror of the camp, life never ceases to have meaning, a positive attitude that gave him strength – and, he believes, contributed to his survival.

So, let us return to the nuns of Notre Dame. Which of the following two women do you think lived longer?

Nun 1: “I was born on September 26th, 1909, the oldest of seven children (five girls and two boys). I taught chemistry and Latin at the Notre Dame Institute. By the grace of God, I intend to do what is best for our order.”

Nun 2: “God started my life well by showing me immeasurable grace. Last year was a very happy one. Now I look forward with eager joy to the reception of the ordination.”

Here we have a so-called 'no-brainer'. The answer is the nun with the 'emotionally full' brain. Nun 2 was called Mary and until her death at the age of 101 full of positive feelings...

3rd golden rule

Want a longer life to live? Hey, think positive!

To think positively, and ultimately also to feel positively, benefits health, interpersonal relationships and leads to a longer and more fulfilling life. Therefore, it is worth investing in your positive thinking.



Brief story to delve more deeply into golden rule number 3

"Think of a person who loves you unconditionally. Who fully accepts you just as you are. Who loves you no matter what you do. If you do not have or have not had such a person in your life, imagine someone who loves you so unreservedly. Now feel this love and this warmth, the sun of this affection."

Do you feel your heart warming? Now comes the crunch!

"Replace this other person who loves you unconditionally with yourself."

At this moment, a collective sigh usually goes through the mediation group. Here and there you can hear soft sobbing. It takes several minutes before the participants can even begin imagining themselves as the ones who love unconditionally, embrace themselves inwardly and accept themselves with all their weaknesses.

Is it worth learning compassion in this way? The research is unanimous: yes.⁷² People with a solid feeling of compassion for

themselves are less often depressed and find it far easier to be compassionate towards other people.

The link to positive thinking is clear. If you like yourself, you have less reason to think badly about yourself and you also think less negatively about others. Instead, positive thinking emphasizes the good within yourself and others.

Lessons for you personally

At work

- Your customer keeps coming back to request changes. You reassure yourself every time that each suggestion will improve the project. But you don't really believe that; you think the customer is an irritating tyrant who doesn't know what they want. 'Imposed positive thinking' is distinctly unhelpful here, because that will only give the customer license to continue harassing you and forcing you to view every one of these harassments as a positive test. But you can use positive thinking to change perspectives. See the whole thing as a game. Try giving the customer a clear statement about just what you are and are not prepared to do on their behalf. You might be surprised by the result. You can often 'educate' an awkward customer by establishing boundaries, as you do for children. You might describe it as 'tough love'.
- Do you ever feel you can't switch off after work? You keep thinking about clients, colleagues and bosses long after you've left the office? This need not be a problem – provided you frame your thoughts in a positive way. Research has shown that positive feelings and thoughts about work promote both initiative and performance.⁷³ So striving to completely separate our private and work lives may not be necessary at all. What's important is that we think and feel positively about our work.

At home

- Your child is in a difficult phase and sees injustice all around. “This is totally unfair!” Sounds familiar? You may even have contributed to this unjust world yourself – by deciding, for example, that your daughter is not allowed to have her ears pierced until she is 14 years

old. You are subjected on a daily basis to complaints that all her friends have not just one, but two, three, even four holes in each ear. "Totally unfair!"

I myself found a solution to this particular problem by suggesting to my then seven-year-old daughter: "Honey, if you can have everything now, what will you have in your long life to look forward to? When you're 14, you get to pick the best earrings, and until then you will have a delightful feeling of anticipation." This worked so well that she later explained to her five-year-old brother, who wasn't allowed to watch a DVD on Friday, but only Saturday: "Now you can look forward to it for a whole day." (As she did, in fact, look forward to the earrings for the next seven years). Children need clear announcements, and preferably ones that involve not only something negative but also something positive. And – who would have guessed – children can even handle the fact that they are different from the others in their school; indeed, they may be downright proud of it. (By the way, in the Frank household, the 'from 14 rule' also applies to smartphones. Our children have accepted this; it is the other parents who criticize us – maybe because they feel 'judged' in their smartphone policies and need to make themselves feel better. But I digress....)

- Your partner wants to set up a business and dreams of great success. You wonder whether this dreaming is a help or a hindrance. In fact, research distinguishes between positive expectations and positive fantasies.⁷⁴ Pure fantasizing puts people in a state in which they think they have already achieved what they want, and this generally drains them of the energy they need to realize their ambition. Instead, it is better for them to focus on their expectations. This engenders readiness for action, while keeping them aware of the obstacles along the way. So help your partner to separate their ambitions from their fantasies by asking them about their concrete expectations.

For yourself

- You are stressed and have trouble falling asleep at night. Why not think about three things each night in bed that were beautiful today and for which you are grateful? For example, is your body feeling

really well after your work-out? Has a colleague paid you a compliment? Wasn't lunch surprisingly tasty? I'm sure you will feel stress and anger ebbing away as you drift into contented sleep. Or try this. Choose a letter from the alphabet and think of three nice things that start with that letter. By the time you have worked your way from rose, radish and racing car to Brazil, butterscotch and bobble caps, the stress will have evaporated.

- You have put off a big task for too long and have now delivered too late. That upsets you and you're unhappy with yourself. Stop it! To reduce the risk of repeating the procrastination, it is healthier to forgive yourself completely.⁷⁵ If you forgive yourself, that means you have taken responsibility for procrastinating – but without slipping into the destructive whirlpool of self-accusations. Since every self-accusation is associated with negative stress, people who condemn themselves tend to put off the next urgent task even longer. So, discard negative thoughts and give yourself a friendly pat on the back. “Oh, dear, I didn't manage that at all well. But I know why: it was just too much for me, and I wasn't sure I could do it at all. I forgive you, my darling, let me hug you. Next time you will certainly make it!” If that bit of self-love made you flinch, you probably realize what a long path to self-forgiveness you need to tread!

Five questions for reflection

1. How much do you recognize yourself in this quotation from the writer Anaïs Nin: “We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are”? Do you remember the guest who ignored you, or the one you had a lovely chat with? How can you learn to perceive situations in a healthier manner?
2. Have you ever observed yourself think? How often do you think positively? How often negatively?
3. Would you like to live a long, physically – and mentally – healthy life? What do you do to support this?
4. Does the relentless optimist, who always emphasizes the positive and rarely mentions their own suffering, annoy you? If so, why? What 'emotional bonus' do you get from focusing on the negative?
5. Do you love yourself? Or do you think that you are only partly worth loving? If you think the latter, then how can you truly love others, forgive others and care for others? Life is better when you promote yourself rather than destroy yourself!