

# Are Your Emotional Problems Preventing Life Being Enjoyable?

## Self Help to Help You Overcome Emotional Limitations

### Accentuating the Positive



#### Is The Glass Half Full Or Half empty?

Many people have trouble, trying to stop thinking about worrying and negative thoughts. When people are asked, “What is the best thing to do if watching a disturbing television programme?” There’s a number of common answers. What would you say? Most people answer, “Turn it off”. That is the 3<sup>rd</sup> best answer.

The 1<sup>st</sup> best answer is “Don’t watch disturbing TV in the first place.” That is don’t choose to think about disturbing things. The next best answer is “Change the channel to something more pleasant and then turn it off.”

Why? That’s how the mind works. It doesn’t help to try not to think of something. If someone say, “Whatever you do don’t think of pink elephants” – what happens? If someone says, “Think of tigers,” – that helps you stop thinking about elephants – actually you just started thinking about tigers. The idea is to put some good thing in to your mind, to replace the negative thought. That helps you stop worrying – and start thinking about solutions.

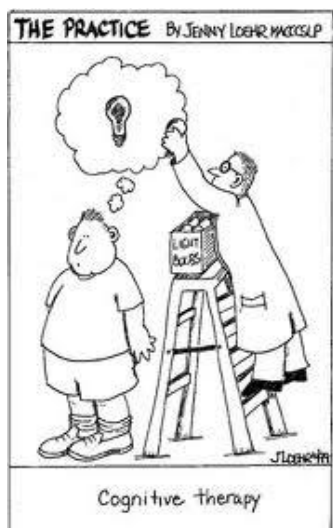


#### Mental Flexibility

It helps to achieve this if you have good mental flexibility. That is you have practised using your mental accelerator and brakes, a function of the front of the brain. One way is to use a Stroop test, where you name the colour of ink the word is printed in, rather than the actual written word. It’s about disrupting habits. If you have a suitable device you can download an App to practise this.

#### Switching Perspective

A common issue when you are experiencing pain or distress, is that it takes over, it becomes an extreme. Things appear as black and white, you are in pain or not in pain, happy or unhappy. Such a rigid world view inevitably creates lots of ups and downs. By practising switching perspective, for example observing different the kinds of sensations in your body, both positive and negative, could also help you create yourself a more agile brain, able to find a greater calm in all types of situations.



#### Reappraisal

Another strategy that’s been shown to help improve emotional resilience is Cognitive Reappraisal. This involves reinterpreting the meaning of challenging experience, to see it as less negative.

Intentionally reinterpreting a situation, such as a job rejection or loss of a friend, has been found to improve mood and psychological wellbeing. One study of Vietnam prisoners of war, many of whom had been brutally tortured, were found to have a greater strength, wisdom and resilience, if they had reappraised their imprisonment, in a positive and meaningful way. They were also more positive about the future, and more able to relate to others and appreciate life.

This reappraisal is used in other therapies, which have been found to be effective for mood and anxiety disorders, such as cognitive behavioural therapy or CBT. The aim in CBT is to help individuals observe their own thoughts and behaviours, to challenge the negative assumptions about themselves and situations they find difficult, whilst replacing them with more realistic and positive views.



This can be done by asking: “Is there a less destructive way to look at this situation? Am I catastrophising or exaggerating, its potential negative impact? Is there something that I can learn from this experience, or is it possible to grow stronger as a result?”

Brain scans show that training in cognitive reappraisal or mindfulness both increase activity in areas of the brain important for positive emotions, emotional control and recovery from negative emotions.



Research also suggests an optimistic outlook and positive emotions are strongly associated with good mental and physical health and longevity. This was shown in a study of nuns. 90% of the nuns who described themselves most positively, when they first joined the convent, were still alive at 85, whereas only 34% of the least positive, survived to that age.

There’s evidence that our emotional state literally influences how we see the world. Individuals with anxiety are more automatically drawn to negative information and are much quicker at seeing negative words and images. They tend to interpret ambiguous information more negatively — thinking people with neutral facial expressions as being unfriendly.

Negative emotions are known to increase physiological arousal, narrow our focus of attention and make our behaviour more survival oriented. Whereas positive emotions, are associated with reduced agitation, broader focus, and increased creativity and flexibility.



### Brain Training

Fortunately, the bias towards the negative, can be easily changed. Studies show that if you are trained to tune out negative words and images, by influencing your attention consciously or unconsciously, to perceive more positive stimuli, increases your positive interpretation. An example would be to repeatedly search for and recognise the happy positive facial expressions out of a group of pictures. Again if you have a suitable device you can download an Ap to train on this. Even a relative short course of training, can profoundly reduce symptoms of social anxiety disorder, and the people involved, were continuing to experience the benefits, when followed up 4 months later.



Cultivating a realistic optimism is not simply whitewashing reality or wearing rose coloured spectacles. An overly buoyant outlook has dangers in ignoring negative information and underestimating risky situations. Realistic optimists however, filter out the unnecessary negative information, but remain focused on problems that need to be dealt with.

### Embracing The Familiar

So what other ways can increase our level of positivity, if we choose? The left brain positive emotional centres are triggered by all that is familiar, thinking about close friends and family, pets, favourite experiences. Seeing photographs of people you love also reduces pain perception dramatically. Listening to favourite music that you’ve listened to all your life will also help boost the

positive emotional centres.

### Gratitude Journal

A proven strategy to build up your positivity muscles is keeping a gratitude journal. This involves writing down 5-10 things about your life that you feel grateful for, twice a day.



It's important not just to write about the experience but to visually imagine it and focus on the feelings associated with it such as lightness, warmth, openness and other pleasurable feelings. Studies have shown that volunteers, creating mental images of positive events, felt much better than those who used words alone. In fact the group that used words alone, were found to feel worse.

Practising gratitude, improves our ability to notice and appreciate the positives in the world. It is said to be the foundation of healthy relationships, adaptable personality, physical wellbeing, managing stress and quality of sleep. An attitude of gratitude's been shown to reduce the experience of pain and improve overall life satisfaction.

Participants in one study recorded their positive emotions and degree of socially connectedness. After 9 weeks there was an increase in their level of positive emotions, social connectedness and a measure of physiological relaxation known as vagal tone. Social connectedness is important because it's been shown that a feeling of social isolation, is a health risk comparable to smoking, drinking, obesity and lack of physical activity.

This measure of physiological relaxation can also be increased by hearing positive feedback about yourself, reflecting daily on positive social experiences and by practising a type of meditation known as loving kindness.

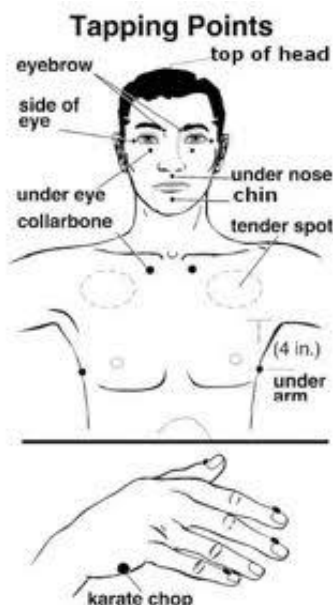


### Compassionate Goals

Loving kindness meditation aims to increase compassion for our self and others. Studies have found boosting compassion for others, boosts self-compassion and that people with self-compassion are more patient, kind and tolerant with themselves.

Compassionate goals as opposed to self-centred goals; also have been found to create virtuous cycles, that help solidify relationships. Compassionate goals and affirmations have also been found to be more effective in bolstering self-esteem, that those that are self-centred.

Studies have shown that people who have a greater empathy and compassion to the suffering of others, creates a greater calm in them, as measured by heart rate, relative to those who have less empathy.



### Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT)

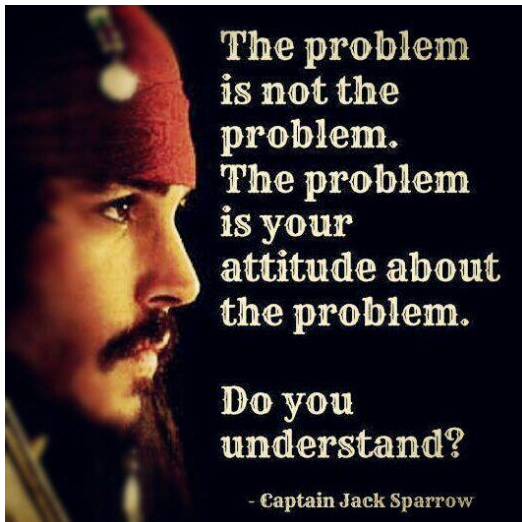
Another technique which you might have heard of is emotional freedom technique. There are number of different styles of these tapping and holding techniques.

From a neurological point of view they probably work because they combine the approaches we've discussed such as connecting with an emotion, paying attention, non-judgmental awareness, present time consciousness, using the hands, empathic acceptance and positive affirmation.

Generally they involve a process of mentally tuning into the problem, while tapping on various points of the body and saying something like, "Even though I have this type of problem, I deeply and completely love and accept myself."

There's plenty more on You Tube about EFT.



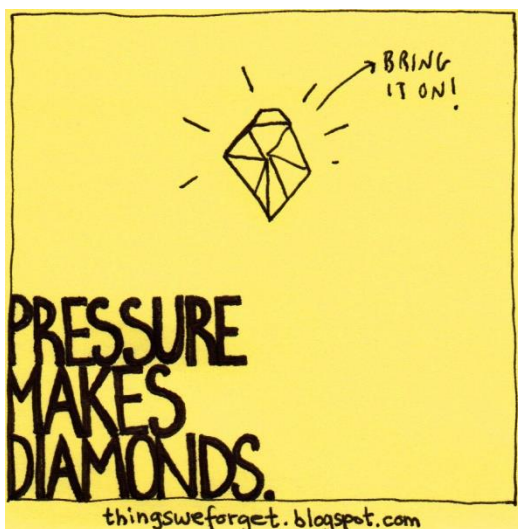


### Commitment, Enthusiasm And Willingness To Succeed

You've heard already that the attitude you have to life, is crucial. The importance of attitude was further illustrated in a study of employees in large company. They were assessed 6 years prior to and after the company broke up. In the follow up the study, they found that 2/3 of the group had suffered heart attacks, depression, anxiety, alcoholism, and divorce.

In contrast the other third survived and thrived. What was the difference between these groups that made the healthy group exceptional? The study found they had qualities, such as an increased commitment to what they were doing, enthusiasm for a challenge and a sense of control over their lives. These people were willing to struggle to succeed rather than passively accepting, often seeking mentors to learn from, and willing to

learn from all experiences, whether negative or positive.



They were also found to have a common background. Their childhood experience was often one involving multiple stresses, such as divorce, frequent moves, illness, or death in the family. It seems they had learned to meet adversity, with a greater tenacity and sense of opportunity.

Key attributes of this survivor personality has been looked for amongst Vietnam Vets, Holocaust survivors and many other types of people, who had experienced significant trauma. The most resilient and functional tend to have adaptive traits such as curiosity, playfulness, persistence, optimism, flexibility, and self-confidence.

We've discussed a few different approaches that can build up your mental muscles, to help you diffuse the emotional minefield

and build up your mental resilience. I'm sure you'll find enough benefits to keep you motivated. Though it is a case of practise makes perfect.

### A Simpler Method When It's Hard To Think

It might not always be possible to use an exercise like these, in the heat of adversity. Sometimes we get landed in that Wimbledon Final without any preparation. So what can we do when it's hard to think, hard to process what's happening. Well when it seems insurmountable, distraction might be tempting, or drugging ourselves is some way. But what might be a more helpful option?

Another technique, which has been shown to help to switch off the emotional centre, is reciting what is known in the East as "The Prayer of the Wise".

This is simply by saying "May all beings be happy, may all beings be well, may all beings be free from disease, may all beings be without misery of any sort." It is said the wise remember these words, first thing every morning. A useful way to look at it is, as an intention on how you aim to interact with everyone you meet, during the day.



## **First Aid?**

Various supplements, herbal remedies and tinctures that may be of benefit, are available from local Health Food Shops. At Back-in-Action we stock a supplement called DSF (De-Stress Formula), full of the kinds of vitamins and minerals your body uses up a lot when it's stressed. A cheaper alternative, that is likely to be helpful is increasing the amount of B vitamins in your diet – perhaps by taking a 'B-Complex' supplement.

Helping to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system (the rest and digest 'Relaxation Response') is also a good idea. A physical approach, that is thought to do this, is to simply hold the forehead. How many people have you seen do that before when they are emotionally traumatised? It's quite intuitive. Another way that might help is just to very gently stroke (almost tickle) the inside softer surface of the wrists, for a ½ a minute or so. Breathing exercises may also be beneficial. As with everything – practise is essential.

Other ways to switch off the fear centres (amygdala) in the brain are attentive listening and attentively working with your hands. The centres of the brain involved in good balance also affect the amygdala, so yoga exercises to practise balance, good spinal health and being still can be helpful. In the long term, sitting still and practising meditation is an excellent way to calm down the amygdala. Conversely some moderate or gentle aerobic exercise should also be very effective – particularly if you've been physically inactive.

## **WARNING**

If you have more serious problems, none of these techniques are a replacement for medical help, medicines, help from a GP, psychiatrist, psychologist or counsellor. These techniques may be useful complementary help for milder problems. If you are having serious difficulties please consult appropriate professional help.



## **Do You Still Need Some More Help?**

We have various practitioners at ***Back-in-Action*** that may be able to help you relax emotionally:

- Neuro Emotional Technique – practised by Louis
- CranioSacral Technique – practised by Lea Miller
- Hypnotherapy – Pat Dix

If you want more help or information please call ***Back-in-Action*** on **01772 749245** or e-mail [reception@back-in-action.com](mailto:reception@back-in-action.com).

Other Options – Local and Internet:

- Counselling, Psychotherapy etc.
- Mindfulness Training classes – developed from Buddhist practises into a secular approach.
- Emotional Freedom Technique – how to info available on the internet (You-Tube) and various practitioners locally.
- Buddhist Centres – helpful in learning meditation and other practises.
- Christian Meditation Group – meets at St Mary's church
- Yoga Classes
- Practical Philosophy Classes –these classes can be helpful, they introduce a range of techniques and practises which help to cultivate attention and calm the mind.



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