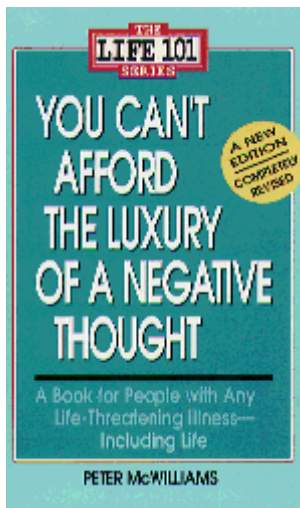


YOU CAN'T AFFORD THE LUXURY OF A NEGATIVE THOUGHT

By Peter McWilliams

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YOU CAN'T AFFORD THE LUXURY OF A NEGATIVE THOUGHT

A Book for People with Any Life-Threatening Illness
-- Including Life

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- [Introduction](#)
- Part One -- [The Disease](#)
- Part Two -- [The Cure](#)
 - [ONE: Act-Centuate the Positive](#)
 - [TWO: E-lim-i-nate the Negative](#)
 - [THREE: Latch on to the A-firm-a-tive](#)

YOU CAN'T AFFORD THE LUXURY OF A NEGATIVE THOUGHT

INTRODUCTION

This is not a book just for people with life-threatening illnesses. It's a book for anyone afflicted with one of the primary diseases of our time: negative thinking.

I come before you a certified expert on the subject: I'm a confirmed negaholic. I don't just see a glass that's half-full and call it half-empty; I see a glass that's completely full and worry that someone's going to tip it over.

Negative thinking is always expensive-dragging us down mentally, emotionally, and physically-hence I refer to any indulgence in it as a luxury. When, however, we have the symptoms of a life-threatening illness-be it AIDS, heart trouble, cancer, high blood pressure, or any of the others-negative thinking is a luxury we can no longer afford.

I remember a bumper sticker from the 1960s-"Death Is Nature's Way of Telling You to Slow Down." Well, the signs of a life-threatening illness are nature's way of telling you to-as we say in California-lighten up.

Be easier on yourself. Think better of yourself. Learn to forgive yourself and others.

This is a book about getting behind on your worrying. Way, way behind. The further behind on your worrying you get, the further ahead you'll be.

My favorite quote on worry: "Worrying is the interest paid on a debt you may not owe."

This is not so much a book to be read as it is a book to be used. It doesn't have to be read cover to cover. I like to think you can flip it open at any time to any page and get something of value from it. This is especially true of the second-and longest-section of the book.

This book has two sections: *The Disease* and *The Cure*.

The disease is not any specific illness, but what I believe to be a precursor of all life-threatening illnesses-negative thinking.

The cure is not a wonder drug or a vaccination or The Magic Bullet. The cure is very simple: (1) spend more time focusing on the positive things in your life (Accentuate the

Positive); (2) spend less time thinking negatively (Eliminate the Negative); and (3) enjoy each and every moment you can (Latch on to the Affirmative).

That's it. Simple, but far from easy.

It's the aim of this book to make the process simple and, if not easy, at least easier.

Please don't use anything in this book against yourself. Don't interpret anything I say in *The Disease* as blame. When I use the word responsibility, for example, I simply mean you have the ability to respond. (And you are responding or you wouldn't be reading this book.)

And please don't take any of the suggestions in *The Cure* as "musts," "shoulds," or "have-tos." Think of them as joyful activity, creative play, curious exploration-not as additional burdens in an already burdensome life.

This book is not designed to replace proper medical care. Please use this book in conjunction with whatever course of treatment your doctor or health-care provider prescribes. If you have a life-threatening illness, you will have to take some life-supporting actions, and naturally these include proper medical attention.

You are far more powerful than you ever dreamed.

You are a marvelous, wonderful, worthwhile person-just because you are. That's the point of view I'll be taking. Please join me for a while-an hour, a week, a lifetime-at that viewing point.

PART ONE

THE DISEASE

The Power of Thoughts (Part One)

*Thinking is
an experimental dealing
with small quantities of energy,
just as a general
moves miniature figures
over a map
before setting his troops
in action.*

SIGMUND FREUD

A simple thought. A few micromilliwatts of energy flowing through our brain. A seemingly innocuous, almost ephemeral event. And yet, a thought--or, more accurately, a carefully orchestrated series of thoughts--has a significant impact on our mind, our body, and our emotions.

Thoughts cause responses in the body. Think of a lemon. Imagine cutting it in half. Imagine removing the seeds with the point of a knife. Smell the lemon. Now, imagine squeezing the juice from the lemon into your mouth. Imagine digging your teeth into the center of the lemon. Chew the pulp. Feel those little things (whatever those little things are called) breaking and popping inside your mouth. Most people's salivary glands respond to the very thought of a lemon.

For some people, thinking about the sound of fingernails on a chalkboard is physically uncomfortable. Try this--imagine an emery board or a double-sided piece of sandpaper. Imagine putting it in your mouth. Bite down on it. Now move your teeth from side to side. Goose bumps?

Thoughts influence our emotions. Think of something you love. What do you feel? Now think of something you hate. What do you feel? Now, something you love again. We don't have to change our emotions--we change our thoughts, and our emotions follow along. Now imagine your favorite place in nature. Where is it? A beach? A meadow? A mountaintop? Take your time. Imagine lying on your back, your eyes closed. Feel the sun on your face. Smell the air. Hear the sounds of creation. Become a part of it. Feel more relaxed?

Most people who took the time to try these little experiments know what I'm talking about.

Those who thought, "This stuff is stupid. I'm not going to try anything as silly as this!" are left with the emotional and physiological consequences of their thoughts--perhaps irritability, impatience, or even hostility. A few--because of their thoughts about books containing sentences such as "Now imagine your favorite place in nature"--put this book down, never to pick it up again. These people (bless their independent hearts!) proved the point as well as those who followed along with the "suggested" thoughts. The point: thoughts have power over our mind, our body, and our emotions.

Positive thoughts (joy, happiness, fulfillment, achievement, worthiness) have positive results (enthusiasm, calm, well-being, ease, energy, love). Negative thoughts (judgment, unworthiness, mistrust, resentment, fear) produce negative results (tension, anxiety, alienation, anger, fatigue).

To know why something as minuscule as a thought can have such a dramatic effect on our mind, body, and emotions, it helps to understand the automatic reaction human beings have whenever they perceive danger: the Fight or Flight Response.

The Fight or Flight Response

Human beings have been around for a long, long time. One of the main reasons the human animal has survived as long and as successfully as it has is its highly developed, integrated, and instantaneous response to perceived danger: the Fight or Flight Response.

Let's consider our not-too-distant ancestor, Zugg. Zugg is far more advanced than a simple caveman--he has learned to manipulate tools, to till the fields, and to build shelters. Zugg is out tilling his field one day when he hears a twig snap in the underbrush.

Zugg, because he has a fairly well-developed mind, remembers that one time when he heard a twig snap, a wild animal came out of the underbrush and ate his sister, Zuggrina. His mind immediately associates twig snapping with ravenous wild animals. Without even having to think about it, he prepares. He focuses all his attention on the geographical area of the snap. His brain concentrates on the input of his senses. His mind whirls through possible defense strategies and paths of retreat. His emotions flare: a heady combination of fear and anger. Adrenalin, sugar, and other stimulants surge into his system. Blood is diverted from comparatively unimportant functions of the body--such as digesting food, fighting infections, and healing wounds--and rushes to the skeletal muscles, especially his arms and legs. The eyes narrow; the muscles tense.

He is ready.

Ready for what? To do battle or to run; to combat or to escape, "to take a stand and fight or take off out of here," as Joni Mitchell put it. Hence, the Fight or Flight Response. It's an automatic, physiological response to danger--either real or perceived.

The Fight or Flight Response has been an essential tool for the survival of our species. Back in Zugg's time, the more laid-back humans were, for the most part, eaten. These gentler folk might hear a twig snap and say, "Hark, a twig snapping. Isn't that a lovely sound?" The next thing they knew they were dinner. This group did not, uh, persevere.

But Zugg and his kind? Victorious. They got through the animal wars, and then, having seemingly nothing better to do, spent the last 5,000 years fighting one another in human wars. People with the most intensely honed Fight or Flight Responses lived to fight another day, and, more importantly from a genetic point of view, lived to reproduce another night.

The Zuggrinas played an important role in all this, too. The offspring of the women who could defend their young the fiercest and/or grab their young and run the fastest survived. The most protected children--who were most likely to make it to adulthood and reproduce--were the ones with the genetically strongest Fight or Flight Response.

In the past few hundred years--in the Western world, at least--the need for the Fight or Flight Response has, for all practical purposes, disappeared.

When was the last time you had to physically fight or flee to save your life?

I'm talking about you, not people you read about in the newspapers or see on TV all the time." Yes, but you're not James Bond (etc.). In fact, nobody is. Please apply everything in this book to your life, not the fictional lives of television, movies, and novels, or the almost-fictional lives of "real people" reported in The Press (both print and electronic). Also, please avoid the temptation to apply this information to "the average person." There is no such person, and even if there were, he or she is not you. You are a unique individual. Use this book to take an honest, perceptive look at yourself--the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful--and learn to accept and love it all.

The Fight or Flight Response, ironically, now works against our survival in these newfangled civilized times. The veneer of civilization is thin--a few hundred years papered over millions of years of biological evolution. The "beast" within is still strong.

When we are cut off in traffic, are spoken to unkindly, fear that our job may be in danger, get a rent increase, hear Nostradamus's revised doomsday predictions, are told the restaurant lost our reservation, or have a flat tire, the Fight or Flight Response kicks in with full force as though our lives depended on slugging it out or running away in that very moment.

Worse, the Fight or Flight Response is activated whenever we think about being cut off in traffic, think that our job may be in danger, think about getting a rent increase, think about Nostradamus's dire predictions, think about the restaurant losing the reservation, or think about having a flat tire. Even if none of these "disasters" (only one of which could be genuinely life-threatening) comes to pass, just thinking that any one of them might happen is enough to trigger the Fight or Flight Response.

The Fight or Flight Response is alive and well.

And it's killing us.

Negative Thoughts and the Mind

When the Fight or Flight Response is triggered, the mind immediately focuses on the area of perceived danger. It is intent on finding what's wrong. It's looking for danger, evil, enemies, wild beasts.

It's a good bet that our friend Zugg didn't spend too much time appreciating the color of the sky or the fragrance of the flowers as he squinted in the direction of the twig snap. No. He was looking for trouble. His mind automatically filtered out anything that didn't pertain to the perceived danger. If the evidence wasn't bad, it was no good.

The mind is a marvelous filtering mechanism. It shelters us from large amounts of unnecessary information. If it didn't, we would probably go mad. We simply cannot pay conscious attention to every single detail being collected by our five senses.

Without moving it, be aware of your tongue. Were you aware of it before I asked? Probably not. The sensation was there, but your mind filtered it out--you didn't need that information. Look carefully at the paper on this page. What's the texture like? Had you noticed that before? Unless you are in the printing or paper trade, probably not. Are there any smells in the room? How about noises? Ticking clock? Air conditioner? Feel the sensation of your body against whatever you're sitting (or lying) on. Have you forgotten about your tongue again? When the Fight or Flight Response is activated, we begin to look for everything wrong with a situation, person, place, or thing. And, boy, do we find it! There's always something wrong. We're living in a material world. Material things are, almost by definition, imperfect. So there's our mind, automatically filtering out the positive while automatically focusing on the negative. Sounds like the perfect recipe for misery. But it gets worse.

Zugg's mind, you will recall, also reviewed past moments of his life in which snapping twigs played a devastating part. There was, of course, that terrible time with Zuggrina. Poor Zuggrina. Then there was that time with OggaBooga. Poor OggaBooga.

Zugg is now looking not just for twig-snap memories, but for memories of all wild beasts devouring anything. He even thinks back to times he thought about wild beasts devouring anything. He is searching his memory for real and imaginary images of mutilation, and there are plenty to be found.

We often do the same thing. If someone cuts us off in traffic, our mind goes reeling back to all the rude and inconsiderate people we've ever seen driving cars, then to all the rude and inconsiderate people we've ever seen anywhere, then to all the rude and inconsiderate people we've seen in movies, on TV, or in the theater of our imagination.

If someone is five minutes late for an appointment, we often spend four minutes and fifty-nine seconds of that five minutes remembering every other time the person was late, all people who were ever late, and every situation--either real or imagined--of being disappointed or feeling unloved.

The mind--an incredibly perceptive tool--is looking both within and without for negativity. It finds it. That thought triggers a more intense Fight or Flight Response, which demands an even more enthusiastic negative mental search, which discovers even more hideous evidence, which kicks off a stronger Fight or Flight Response, which . . .

Get the idea? It's known as a temper tantrum or losing one's cool or an anxiety attack or getting steamed--or life as we know it in this (and most likely the next) century.

Negative Thoughts and the Body

The Fight or Flight Response puts a body through its paces. All the resources of the body are mobilized for immediate, physical, demanding action--fight or flee. All the other bodily functions are put on hold--digestion, assimilation, cell production, body maintenance, circulation (except to certain fight-or-flee skeletal muscles), healing, and immunological defenses.

In addition, the body is pumping chemicals--naturally produced drugs, if you will--into the system. The muscles need energy and they need it fast.

Zugg was luckier than we are in this respect. Often he would actually use these chemicals by running them off, climbing them off, or fighting them off. In our civilized world, we usually don't. At most we bang our fists or throw stuff (which only hurts our hands and breaks things).

Occasionally we yell, but that's not physical enough. Our body has armed itself to *fight or flee for its life*--but usually we just sit and seethe.

The repeated and unnecessary triggering of the Fight or Flight Response puts enormous physiological stress on the body.

It make us more vulnerable to disease (the immune system being told, "Hold off on attacking those germs--we have wild beasts to fight!"), digestive trouble (ulcers and cancers at the far side of it), poor assimilation (preventing necessary nutrients from entering the system), slower recovery from illnesses (conquering a disease is less urgent than conquering a wild beast), reduced cell production, sore muscles, fatigue, and a general sense, as Keats put it, "that if I were underwater I would scarcely kick to come to the top."

Sound bad? It gets worse.

The emergency chemicals, unused, eventually break down into other, more toxic substances. Our body must then mobilize--yet again--to get rid of the poisons.

The muscles stay tense for a long time after the response is triggered--especially muscles around the stomach, chest, lower back, neck, and shoulders. (Most people have chronic tension in at least one of these areas.) We feel jittery, nervous, uptight.

The mind always tries to find reasons for things. If the body's feeling tense, it wonders, "What is there to feel tense about?" Seldom do we conclude (correctly), "Oh, this is just the normal aftereffect of the Fight or Flight Response. Nothing to be concerned about." Usually we start scanning the environment (inner and outer) for something out of place. And, as I mentioned before, there will always be something out of place.

The mind's a remarkable mechanism. Given a task, the mind will fulfill it with astounding speed and accuracy. When asked, "What's wrong?" it will compile and cross-reference a list of grievances with blinding swiftness and precision. Everything everyone (including ourselves) should have done but didn't and shouldn't have done but did is reviewed, highlighted, indexed, and prioritized. All this elaborate mental labor sparked by a sensation in the body.

Naturally, this review of negative events prompts a new round of Fight or Flight Responses, which promotes more tension in the body, which promotes more mental investigation into What's Wrong?

Do you see how this downward mind/body spiral can continue almost indefinitely?

It's not surprising, then, that some people make a decision deep inside themselves that life is just not worth living.

THE CURE

*MACBETH: Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, Raze out the
written troubles of the brain, And with some sweet
oblivious antidote Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that
perilous stuff Which weighs upon the heart?*

DOCTOR: Therein the patient Must minister to himself.

SHAKESPEARE

ACT-CENTUATE THE POSITIVE

*There is no cure for birth and death save to enjoy the
interval.*

GEORGE SANTAYANA

Yes, Virginia, there is a cure for the disease of negative thinking--dozens of cures, in fact. Any one of the techniques, suggestions, or ideas in this section may do it for you. Any one may be the key that opens whole new worlds of aliveness, enthusiasm, and health.

Yours may be a combination lock that requires five keys, or ten, or twenty, or you may need everything in this book--and a hundred more techniques you discover on your own--to open the doors to your inner kingdom of joy, self-confidence, and happiness. Whatever it takes is whatever it takes.

Whatever it takes, the results will be worth it.

I'm going to begin by talking about death (eek!) and the fear of death (eek! eek!). After that, luncheon is served. I'm laying out a smorgasbord of positivity.

Mostly, these suggestions will seem familiar because they're good old-fashioned common sense. I tend to be pragmatic--if something works, I use it; if not, I try something else. What I pass along to you was learned through my own process of trial and error. It is from a firm--and substantial--foundation of mistakes that I offer these suggestions.

There's no particular order to this gathering of ideas. No "Do this first, then this, then this." You are the architect of your cure. Naturally, like all good architects, you'll be consulting with other professionals--but the Master Plan is in your hands.

Choosing the pathway to your cure is easy--just follow your heart.

Please don't just read this book; use it. Do some things. Try them. Find out if a technique works for you--if it produces uplifting results. If so, do it some more. If not, throw it away. Try something else. This book contains a lot of things to try.

And now, The Cure.

Common sense is not so common.

VOLTAIRE

*The music that can deepest reach, And cure all ill, is
cordial speech.*

EMERSON

Death 101 (Part One)

This is a crash course in death. Why death? Shouldn't we be focusing on positive stuff? Yes, but first we have to explore the motivation behind doing all the positive stuff.

*One who longs for death is miserable, but more miserable
is he who fears it.*

JULIUS WILHELM ZINCGREF
1628

*If I could drop dead right now, I'd be the happiest man
alive!.*

SAMUEL GOLDWYN

If you're going to think more positively because you fear death, then whatever you do--no matter how positive--will be an affirmation of that fear.

As long as fear is looming large, you will probably continue with the process of improvement. As soon as fear no longer threatens, you may revert to old habits. When, for example, the medical cure for your illness is discovered, there's no need to fear dying of it; therefore, you may feel you can return to your former habits of negative thinking. That will, of course, recreate the intention to die, and another method of death is likely to appear.

If you use the techniques given in this book because you want to live a fuller, happier, more joyful, and productive life, then you have a foundation that will hold firm. If you undertake these methods as a frantic attempt to outmaneuver the Grim Reaper, the whole venture is, to paraphrase Henry Higgins, "doomed before you even take the vow."

Not that you must be perfectly calm in the face of your own mortality before any of these suggestions will work. Not at all. Fear can be a good motivator to start something. But fear must gradually be replaced with the desire for a positive result if long-term progress is to be made.

It also feels better--running from something you fear is far less enjoyable than running toward something you desire.

*Once you accept your own death, all of a sudden you're
free to live. You no longer care about your reputation. You
no longer care except so far as your life can be used
tactically to promote a cause you believe in.*

SAUL ALINSKY

Running from fear only strengthens fear--you are demonstrating that fear has power over you. Fear must be faced and gone through. The procedure of "getting over" fear is succinctly stated in the title of the book *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*. (A book I haven't read, so I can't recommend it, but it does have a great title.) Only then do we learn the truth of fear--that fear is merely an illusion, not a real thing.

Before I continue with my short course on death, let's stroll over to the next classroom and overhear a few pointers on fear.

The late F. W. H. Myers used to tell how he asked a man at a dinner table what he thought would happen to him when he died. The man tried to ignore the question, but, on being pressed, replied: "Oh well, I suppose I shall inherit eternal bliss, but I wish you wouldn't talk about such unpleasant subjects."

BERTRAND RUSSELL

Fear 101

There are some things it's good to have a healthy fear of--drinking poisons, leaping off tall buildings, sex with gorillas--situations in which our physical body is in imminent danger of annihilation, dismemberment, mutilation, or extinction.

Fear is the main source of superstition, and one of the main sources of cruelty. To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom.

BERTRAND RUSSELL

All other fears--the ones we face most often every day--are illusions. They should be given no more credence or authority over our actions than television commercials, election-year promises, or people who try to sell us flowers in airports.

Most people approach a fearful situation as though fear were some sort of wall. Let's say the situation is walking up to someone we do not know and saying, "Hello."

As we think about approaching the stranger, the wall begins to form. As we imagine what the person may say in response, the wall grows denser. (The other person's response is almost always imagined in the negative: "Would you leave me alone!" Seldom do we imagine the other person looking up at us and singing "Some Enchanted Evening.") If we begin to move in the general direction of the person, the wall becomes almost solid. It seems an impenetrable barrier. We turn away, humming a chorus of "If I Loved You."

But the wall of fear is not real.

Fear as a barrier is an illusion. We have, however, been trained to treat this illusion as though it were real. This belief served us well in our childhood years. Our parents taught us to be afraid of *everything* new. This was--at that time--good advice. We were too

young to know the difference between the legitimately dangerous and the merely exciting.

When we grew old enough to know the difference, however, no one ever taught us to take risks, explore new territories, and treat fear as energy for doing and learning new things. Fear as a reason *not* to do should be tucked away with all those other cozy childhood myths--Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy. (The Tooth Fairy was particularly hard to let go of.)

I'm not afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens. It is impossible to experience one's death objectively and still carry a tune.

[Woody Allen](#)

Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh.

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

If fear is not a wall, what is it? It's a feeling, that's all. It will not (cannot) keep you from physically moving toward something *unless you let it*. It may act up and it may kick and scream. It may make your stomach feel like the butterfly cage at the zoo. But it cannot stop you. You stop you.

The fear of meeting people, for example, is a particularly silly fear. Given that it's in a place where they're not going to slug you (Hell's Angels bars are not recommended), the worst that can happen is that someone will reject you. You are left with rejection. If you don't try, however, you have rejected yourself, and are left with exactly the same thing as if you had tried and failed--nothing.

If you do try, however, you may get what you want.

Even if you get rejected, you'll learn more from the experience than if you had never tried. You may learn, for example, that certain ways of approaching certain people in certain situations work better than others. We can learn as much (sometimes more) by what doesn't work as by what does. If we don't explore all the ways that really do and don't work, we are left with only the untested techniques from our imagination and what seems to work in the movies.

As Dr. [Melba Colgrove](#) once said: "Anything that's worth having is worth asking for. Some say yes and some say no."

To overcome a fear, here's all you have to do: realize the fear is there, and do the action you fear anyway. Move--physically--in the direction of what you want. Expect the fear to get worse. It will. After you do several times the thing you fear, the fear will be less. Eventually, it goes away.

You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, "I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along." You must do the thing you think you cannot do.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

People living deeply have no fear of death.

ANAIS NIN

Fear is something to be moved through, not something to be turned from. In fact, if you feel carefully, you'll discover that the only difference between fear (a supposedly negative emotion) and excitement (a reputedly positive emotion) is what we choose to call it. The sensation is exactly the same. We just add a little "Oh, no!" to fear and a little "Oh, boy!" to excitement, that's all.

Fear, then, can be seen for what it truly is--the energy to do your best in a new situation.

So, with that in mind, let's return to death.

("Oh, no!" "Oh, boy!")

Death 101 (Part Two)

For certain is death for the born And certain is birth for the dead; Therefore over the inevitable Thou shouldst not grieve.

BHAGAVAD GITA 2:27

Death and taxes and childbirth! There's never any convenient time for any of them.

SCARLETT O'HARA

If you think about it, the fear of death is one of the most useless fears we have. Dying is one of the few things that all of us will, sooner or later, do.

If we're going to be afraid of death, we might as well be afraid of breathing or gravity or I Love Lucy reruns or any of the other inevitabilities of life.

Unless we fully accept the inevitability of death, it's hard to enjoy this interval called life. ("This strange interlude," as Eugene O'Neill called it.) In other words, unless we get over our fear of death, we'll never really appreciate life. Unless it's okay to die, we'll never really live.

Someone I know was captured during a war and sentenced to death. He was put in a cell with a window facing the execution ground. Day after day, hour after hour, he watched his comrades marched before a wall and shot. He had no idea when his turn would come. It went on for six weeks. The war ended and he was released. Although he's one of the busiest people I know, he's also one of the calmest. He knows that, no matter what, the worst thing that can happen to him is that he'll die, and he's already faced that fear and come to terms with it.

Take a good look at your fear of death. Let yourself experience the fear. Find out what the fear's all about. Explore the many beliefs humans have about what happens after death. Are these really so terrible? There are, in fact, only three primary beliefs in our culture about what happens to us after death. Let's explore each of them.

DEATH IS IT, THE END, FINITO. As soon as the blood stops flowing to the brain, we have no more experience. Our time here on Earth--which is wholly biological and nothing else--is over.

Death is nothing to us, since when we are, death has not come, and when death has come, we are not.

EPICURUS
341-270 B.C.

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?.

I CORINTHIANS
15:55

If this is what happens after death, we have nothing to worry about. Everything we experience is bioelectrical-chemical reactions, and when it stops, it stops. Our fear of death makes no more sense than the glow in a light bulb worrying about when the power is switched off. When the light is out, the light is out. Period. The end. Nothing.

IT'S HEAVEN OR HELL (OR MAYBE PURGATORY) FOREVER.

When we die, we are judged by God and placed in one of three places: heaven (good), hell (bad), or (in at least one popular belief) purgatory (certainly not as good as heaven, but not as bad as hell).

If this is your belief, then you might consider life-threatening illness as a loving message from God: "Prepare yourself for Paradise." You may prepare yourself so well, in fact, and become so close to God, that God might ask, "Do me a favor?" and you'll say, "Sure."

What?" and God may say, "Stick around another eighty years and continue to share the joy of Spirit with everyone."

WE KEEP COMING BACK UNTIL WE LEARN WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW. The Soul (who we really are) never dies; only the physical body dies. If the Soul has not learned all it needed to learn in one body, it picks up another (at birth) and continues with its education. This is generally known as "reincarnation" and is the most popular belief about life and death worldwide--although not so popular in the United States.

If this is the way things are, we have nothing to worry about. Death is like going from one room to another in a house, or taking off a suit and putting on a bathrobe (silk, with Alfred E. Newman's and my personal motto, "What? Me Worry?" embroidered on the pocket). Death is then a rest stop, a changing room, a summer vacation between semesters.

Either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another. Now if death be of such a nature, I say that to die is to gain; for eternity is then only a single night.

PLATO

Nothing can happen more beautiful than death.

WALT WHITMAN

Some say death is such a wonderful experience that the news must be kept from us or we'd all be killing ourselves just to get there. Of course, if we could fully perceive the joys of The Other Side, then we'd also know why we're here in the first place, so we wouldn't kill ourselves after all.

Take the time to conquer your fear of death. You can still live to be a hundred, and the years between now and then will be happier, healthier, and more exciting. And when it comes time to die, well, bon voyage.

*Death is no more than passing from one room into another.
But there's a difference for me, you know. Because in that
other room I shall be able to see.*

[HELEN KELLER](#)

PART TWO

ACT-CENTUATE THE POSITIVE

*Prayer indeed is good, but while calling on the gods a man
should himself lend a hand.*

HIPPOCRATES

I know accentuate is not spelled "act-centuate." I just wanted to stress the need for action. Some say, "To do is to be." Others say, "To be is to do." I tend to agree with Francis Albert Sinatra: "Do, be, do, be, do." I'll even stoop to jokes stolen from coffee mugs to emphasize the need for action.

I'll pull out songs from the forties, too--such as "Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive," a song written by Johnny Mercer (lyrics) and Harold Arlen (music) during the darkest days of World War II. It became a theme song for an entire country actively involved in doing something. (Winning a war.) They did it.

And so can you.

The Case against "Positive Thinking" (Part One)

*The apprehension of the good Gives but the greater feeling
to the worse.*

SHAKESPEARE

As you may have gathered from what you've read thus far, I am obviously against negative thinking. So, if I'm against negative thinking, I must therefore be in favor of positive thinking.

No.

No?!

No.

Positive thinking, as taught and practiced by many people, is not as dangerous as negative thinking, but it has its downside.

Thoughts are powerful, more powerful than most people give them credit for being. They are not, however, all-powerful. There is more to reality than just thoughts.

For example, try to turn a page in this book without doing anything physical. Don't touch it or move it; just hold the book still and try to turn a page with your thoughts. Or try to think a glass of water to your mouth, or pick up the phone and think-dial a number. You see what I mean? Thoughts are powerful, but not all-powerful. There's a lot of power in our physical abilities, too.

When some people first discover how powerful thoughts are, they begin worshipping the mind. They deny the truth of what's actually happening for a mental image they find more pleasant. This creates a separation between the positive thinker and reality. This separation can be the cause of disorientation, confusion and, eventually, illness.

I am not a pessimist; to perceive evil where it exists is, in my opinion, a form of optimism.

ROBERTO ROSSELLINI

As an example, suppose you had a small cut on your forehead. The positive thinker might say, "Your head is fine. The cut is only an illusion. Think of your forehead as healed. Imagine your forehead perfect."

I would probably say, "Oh, you cut your forehead. Let's wipe the blood off, put on some antiseptic, and bandage it." While I was physically taking care of what needed to be done, I might suggest you hold a positive image of the cut healing quickly. But most likely I'd ask, "What happened?" because there's a certain therapeutic quality in talking about the incident. Also, I'd be curious to know.

And, there may be a lesson in the accident--if nothing else, the way to keep it from happening again.

If I'm not in favor of positive thinking, what am I in favor of? If I'm not in favor of negative thinking, I must be in favor of something positive.

I am.

I recommend focusing on the positive.

Focusing on the Positive

In any given moment, there is ample evidence to prove that life is a bed of thorns or a garden of roses. How we feel about life depends on where we place our attention, that is, what we focus upon.

*Why is it no one ever sent me yet One perfect limousine, do
you suppose? Ah no, it's always just my luck to get One
perfect rose.*

DOROTHY PARKER

Did you ever notice that every time you are given a rose, the stem is covered with thorns? (If you take the thorns off, the flower wilts more quickly. Florists know this, which is why they leave the thorns on.) Do you say, "Why are you giving me this stick with thorns on it?" Of course not. You admire the beauty of the rose. Even if you prick yourself in your enthusiasm, it never seems to hurt--you are too engrossed in appreciating the rose and the person who gave it to you.

Right now, in this moment, without moving from where you are, you can find ample evidence to prove your life is a miserable, depressing, terrible burden, or you can find evidence to prove your life is an abundant, joyful, exciting adventure.

Let's start with the negative. Look at all the imperfections around you. No matter how good anything is, it could be better, couldn't it? Look for dirt, disorder, and dust. See all the things that need cleaning, repairing, and replacing? An endless array of clutter, chaos, and catastrophe assaulting your senses. And all those *damn* alliterations in this paragraph. Dis-gusting.

Now, explore the same environment with an attitude of gratitude and appreciation.

Look around the same area you just surveyed and find the good. You can start with whatever you're sitting or lying on. It's probably softer than a concrete floor. Look at all the other objects you use but take for granted--glasses (both seeing and drinking), tables, windows, the walls and ceiling sheltering you from the elements. Consider the wonder of the electric light. A hundred years ago, you would have to have been very rich or very lucky to have had even one. And you probably have more than one--and a TV and a radio and many other electronic marvels.

What around you do you find aesthetically pleasing? A painting you haven't really looked at in years? The detail work on the clothes you're wearing? A flower? A vase? Wallpaper? Carpet? When was the last time you took a moment to appreciate colors?

*One should sympathize with the joy, the beauty, the color of
life-- the less said about life's sores the better.*

OSCAR WILDE

Did you notice that you tended to feel better when you focused on the positive things in your surroundings? The process of focusing on the positive to produce more positive feelings works the same with things even more intimate than your surroundings--your body, for example.

If you look for all the things wrong with the body, boy, are you going to find them. Pains here, bumps there, rough spots here, too much fat there--the list goes on and on (and, as we get older, goes on and on and on and on).

But take a look at all that's right with your body. Even if you have a pain in your left foot, you can be thankful there's not one in your right. How about all those processes we take for granted? Digestion, circulation, respiration, assimilation, thinking-- yes, we think without having to even think about it. And let's not forget the five senses. Some people take them so much for granted they can't name all five without thinking, "Let's see, what's the fifth one?"

It's as though there were two attorneys in your mind, one gathering evidence for "Life is Awful" and the other gathering evidence for "Life is Wonderful." You're the judge and can rule out any evidence you choose. Your decision is final. Which judicial ruling do you suppose would lead to more joy, happiness, peace, ease, and health?

Try thinking of love or something.

CHRISTOPHER FRY

To focus on the positive is not to disregard certain warning signals of a negative nature that, if ignored, eventually lead to inconveniences at best and disaster at worst. (If we use these "negative" signals to avoid disaster, then they're not so negative after all. Some even call them guardian angels.)

Let's say you're driving down the freeway and the little light goes on, telling you you're running out of gas. I do not suggest ignoring that bit of "negativity" and focusing on how wonderful it is that none of the other warning lights is on. I suggest you get some gas.

Here, by the way, is where negative thinking comes in. The negative reality is that you're low on gas. Negative thinking begins the litany, "I wonder if I'm going to run out of gas before I reach the next station. What will I do if that happens? I'm in the middle of nowhere. What if some highway robbers get me? If I do get to a gas station, will it be the kind I have credit cards for? I bet it will be more expensive than in town. I bet it will be self-service and the pump will be dirty and my hands will smell funny after. I knew I should have filled up in town. Why am I so lazy and stupid?" Etc., etc., etc.

During this inner tirade (which, for accomplished negative thinkers, takes place in under five seconds) the driver, in his or her anxiety, usually speeds up, which only wastes gas.

We are wide-eyed in contemplating the possibility that life may exist elsewhere in the universe, but we wear blinders when contemplating the possibilities of life on earth.

NORMAN COUSINS

What I suggest is this: take note of the negative information, decide what to do about it (whatever corrective action seems to be in order) and return to focusing on the positive (in this case the music, the scenery, the passengers) while working on eliminating the negative.

With medical conditions, it's good to keep track of symptoms, but it does no good to dwell on them. The positive thinker might deny the early symptoms of a disease, making a cure more difficult. The negative thinker might turn every mosquito bite into a killer bee sting.

Positive focusers take a middle road. They note symptoms accurately so they can be reported to their health-care provider. They make an appointment. Beyond that, there's no point in dwelling on the symptoms, so they turn their attention to things more positive.

While we're considering the idea that there is sufficient evidence in any given moment to prove that life is wonderful or that life is terrible, let's take a look at how this works even closer to home: in our memories of the past and our anticipation of the future.

Here, too, we can muddle in the negative: "Tommy wouldn't play with me when I was six." "I have to go to the dentist next week, and I hate the dentist."

Or, we can do positive thinking: "I'm winning the Oscar this year," when we've never been in a movie. "I'm going hiking and camping next week," when we've just had major surgery. "I have so many wonderful friends," when the phone hasn't rung in two weeks.

Or, we could try focusing on the good memories that actually happened and on realistic plans we look forward to with pleasure. "That movie on TV last night was so good." "Helen's coming to visit tomorrow; that will be nice." "The book I ordered should be arriving any day."

Yes, it's good to "live in the moment," but who does that all the time? As long as you're living in memories of the past and projections of the future, you might as well make them happy memories and joyful projections.

I will be giving some techniques later in which you can let your imagination run positively wild. There can be great value in this. What I'm talking about here is day-to-day, ordinary thinking. In my view, negative thinkers need to get their minds out of the sewer and positive thinkers need to get their heads out of the clouds.

Have I made a clear distinction between positive thinking and focusing on the positive? It's a subtle but important difference. Positive thinking imagines any wonderful thing at all, no matter how unrelated it is to the actual events of one's life. Focusing on the positive starts with what's real, what's actually taking place, and moves from there in a joyful direction.

If you spend all your time in a positive future, when will you appreciate the present? The present is the future you dreamed of long ago. Enjoy it.

The Case against "Positive Thinking" (Part Two)

"Optimism," said Candide, "is a mania for maintaining that all is well when things are going badly."

VOLTAIRE

There is a story told of a Master who saw a dead dog decaying in the road. His disciples tried to keep the unsightly animal from him, but the Master saw the unfortunate animal and said, "What pearly white teeth." Even amid stench and decay, there was still something beautiful to behold.

The Master did not--as some positive thinkers might--say the dog was "only sleeping." The Master did not throw a stick and say, "Here, Rover, fetch!" The Master first perceived the reality and then found something good about it.

Positive thinkers sometimes use positive thinking to justify their inability to accept the moment. They have a long list of "shoulds," and, unless reality measures up to their imagined state of perfection (which it almost never does), they retreat into positive thoughts, affirming that, thanks to their thoughts, the future conditions of the world will be better for everyone.

In other words, some people use positive thinking as a holier-than-thou-sounding form of denial.

An optimist may see a light where there is none, but why must the pessimist always run to blow it out?.

MICHEL DE SAINT-PIERRE

A major problem with positive thinking and illness--especially life-threatening illness--is: what about the illness? If you are told to positively think yourself healthy and then get sicker, you may add personal blame to the worsening illness. "If I had only thought more positively, I would be well by now. Where did I fail?"

This is especially true of positive thinkers who tell stories of miracle cures. "If only you think positively, and believe, you, too, can have a miracle cure." Well, maybe, or maybe not.

It took a lot of negative thinking--decades in some cases--to bring on a life-threatening illness. Why should a week or two of positive thinking get rid of it?

Now, I'm all for miracles, and I've seen my share, but miracles can't be counted on. If they could, by definition, they wouldn't be miracles. I tend to follow the Pragmatic Creed: "Hope for the best, prepare for the worst, and shoot down the middle."

If you have a miraculous healing, wonderful! Take all the credit for it. If you have a slow, progressive recovery, great! If you have the usual series of ups and downs that life-threatening illnesses often go through, find something to be grateful for every day, every hour, every minute. Each time you find something, it will make you smile in your heart.

Positive thinking only puts a gap between where you are physically and where you think you "should" be. There are no "shoulds" to a life-threatening illness. You'll be happier, and probably heal faster, if you let go of as many "shoulds" as you can. (More on this later.)

Now I'd like to explore an area in which I take fundamental issue with positive thinkers--how to respond to loss. Positive thinkers might say, "There is no loss, only the opportunity for new experiences. Rejoice!" I say: loss hurts. It also infuriates. That's natural. That's human. To deny the pain and anger with an attitude of platitudes may do more harm than good.

Learn to Mourn

This is a lifetime of good-byes. As the years go on, you'll say good-bye to both people (through moving, change, or death) and things (youth, that semi-tight body you once had, hair, prized possessions). Eventually, you'll say good-bye to it all with your own death.

Learning to mourn, to grieve, to say a good good-bye, is an invaluable tool.

*The sound of her silk skirt has stopped. On the marble
pavement dust grows. Her empty room is cold and still.
Fallen leaves are piled against the doors. Longing for that
lovely lady How can I bring my aching heart to rest?.*

HAN WU-TI
187-57 B.C.
ON THE DEATH OF HIS MISTRESS

When a loss takes place, the mind, body, and emotions go through a process of healing as natural as the healing of a physical injury. Know that feeling lost, sad, angry, hurt, fearful, and tearful at good-byes is a natural part of the healing process.

We recover from loss in three distinct but overlapping phases. The first phase of recovery is shock/ denial/numbness; the second, fear/anger/depression; the third, understanding/acceptance/moving on.

No matter what the loss--from a missed phone call to the death of a loved one--the body goes through the same three phases of recovery. The only difference is the time it takes to go through each stage and the intensity of the feelings at each point along the way.

When we first hear of a loss, our initial reaction is shock/denial/numbness. Often we say, "Oh, no!" We can't believe what we've heard. We go numb.

This ability to deny and go numb is a blessing. Catastrophic losses are too hard to take all at once. It has been suggested that the reason some people have slow, terminal illnesses as their method of dying is because it's going to take them a long time to say good-bye, and they want to do it right.

*Warm summer sun, shine kindly here; Warm northern
wind, blow softly here; Green sod above, lie light, lie light
Good-night, dear heart, good-night, good-night.*

MARK TWAIN EPITAPH FOR HIS DAUGHTER

The next phase, fear/anger/depression, is the one most commonly associated with loss. We think we'll never love or be loved again (fear). We wail against the situations, people, things, and unkind fates that "caused" the loss (anger). We cry, we feel sad, we hurt, we don't want to go on (depression).

One of the toughest feelings to accept is anger at the one who is dying (even if it's yourself). "Why are you leaving me?!" a voice inside wants to know. To feel angry at someone for dying, or angry at yourself over your own death, is perfectly normal. It's a natural stage of recovery that one must pass through. (Pass through--not remain in.)

*We are healed of a suffering only by experiencing it to the
full.*

MARCEL PROUST

Finally we come to understanding/acceptance/ moving on.

We understand that loss is part of life. We accept the loss we suffered, and begin to heal. When healing is well under way, we move on to our next experiences. *How to Survive the Loss of a Love* by [Harold H. Bloomfield](#), M.D., and me explains the process of healing in detail. Available at bookstores or call 1-800-LIFE-101.

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I put this information on grieving in the section "Act-centuate the Positive" because mourning is a positive human ability. It allows us the flexibility to adapt to change. It is not "negative" to feel pain, fear, and anger at loss. It's a natural, human response. The negativity enters when the process of healing is suppressed, glossed over, and denied.

Accept the process. Accept the numbness, the fear, the pain, the anger, the sadness, the tears, and, eventually, accept the healing.

Accepting the healing can be difficult. People may expect you to mourn longer than you find necessary, or they may want your mourning to "hurry up." People often offer comfort to ease their own discomfort. "There, there," they say, "everything's all right," when, in fact, everything is not all right.

Grieving must be done in its own time.

To deny the reality that pain hurts only delays the healing process. Take the time to grieve, to mourn, to say a good good-bye. At the point of genuine understanding and acceptance of your own death (not just a mentally constructed understanding and acceptance) lies the ability to understand and accept the magnificence of life.

*Is there a "cure" for a broken heart? Only time can heal
your broken heart, just as only time can heal his broken
arms and legs.*

MISS PIGGY

PART TWO

*I have had a good many more uplifting thoughts, creative
and expansive visions while soaking in comfortable baths
in well-equipped American bathrooms than I have ever had
in any cathedral.*

EDMUND WILSON

*How many cares one loses when one decides not to be
something but to be someone.*

COCO GABRIELLE CHANEL

E-LIM-I-NATE THE NEGATIVE

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I sandwiched this section on eliminating negativity between two sections on adding positivity. I did this for a reason. I firmly believe that the way to more health, wealth, and happiness is to focus on health, wealth, and happiness. This may sound simplistic, but many people try to obtain health, wealth, and happiness only by trying to eliminate disease, poverty, and unhappiness.

But the lack of disease is not necessarily health, the lack of poverty is not necessarily wealth, and the lack of unhappiness is not necessarily happiness. Sometimes we successfully eliminate a negative and discover we still don't have what we want. "After all that work!" we sigh. And, discouraged, sometimes we return to the negative.

Another problem with trying to get rid of something negative is that we must pay attention to the negative we're trying to eliminate. This attention gives it more energy--our energy--and sometimes makes the negativity seem too great to overcome.

Doing nothing besides eliminating negatives to get what you really want can be the long way `round. If there were one hundred objects on a table, and I wanted you to pick up object 27, I could tell you, as you randomly selected items, "No, don't pick up object 34. No, don't pick up object 29. No, don't pick up object 63."

Eventually, you would get to object 27, and I wouldn't say anything. You might, however, after twenty or thirty "Don'ts," give up. I could hardly blame you. It would have been much easier if I had simply said, "Pick up object 27."

That's why I asked you earlier to make a list of the things you want in life (your Top-Ten List). Going directly for what you want is a much easier and more effective way of getting what you want than eliminating what you don't want.

You may, however, find "negative" parts of your life opposing your goal--these must be sacrificed in order to get what you want. If you want happiness, for example, you must sacrifice unhappiness. Some of these opposites may be easy to give up; others may have become bad habits.

When eliminating the bad habits, always keep in mind why you are eliminating them. Focus on your goal. Rather than saying, "I want to give up negative thinking," tell yourself, "I want to enjoy all the positive things in my life." Rather than, "I want to get rid of this illness," say, "I want vibrant, radiant health."

Give me chastity and continence, but not just now.

ST. AUGUSTINE
354-430

Breaking bad habits can be difficult, but it's easier if you remember that what you're adding to your life (the goal) is more valuable than what you're eliminating (the habit).

In releasing yourself from the bondage of bad habits, don't try to eliminate all of them at once. That's just inviting failure. Take them one or two at a time, starting with the ones that will be easier for you to change. When these are under control, take on a few others that may be a bit more challenging. Build on the strength of each victory.

Separate "Noticing the Negative" from "Negative Thinking"

Over the piano was printed a notice: Please do not shoot the pianist. He is doing his best.

OSCAR WILDE

We're not responsible for every thought that wanders through our brain, only the ones we hold there. The thought, "What an inconsiderate person," may float through our mind and probably do little harm. It's when we add to that thought ("And furthermore . . .") that we get into trouble.

Maybe the person was being inconsiderate. That might be an accurate observation. We start the cycle of negative thinking when we add "and I don't like that" to what we observe.

It's important to keep this distinction in mind when breaking the habit of negative thinking. Merely noticing that something is a certain way, and that that way might fall on the negative side of life, is not a "negative thought."

To notice a houseplant is withering is an observation, and not a positive one. From that observation, we have options.

The first idea that the child must acquire, in order to be actively disciplined, is that of the difference between good and evil; and the task of the educator lies in seeing that the child does not confound good with immobility, and evil with activity.

MARIA MONTESSORI

One, the negative-thinking route: "Oh, the plant is dying. How many times have I told so-and-so to water the plants? Plants always die on me. I must have some plant-killing energy."

Two, the positive-action route: "I'd better water the plant. Apparently I'm not doing enough to impress upon so-and-so the importance of watering the plant; I'll write a note now. Plants don't seem to do well in that location. Maybe I should get a hardier plant."

Every time we see something and think it might be better another way, we are not necessarily having negative thoughts. We get into trouble when we get negative and demand that things and people be different than they are.

If you're not willing to invest the time, activity, and money in making something the way you want it (assuming it's even possible), then you might as well accept it. Acceptance takes less than a second, consumes almost no energy, and costs absolutely nothing.

We live in a negative-feedback world. Often, the signal that tells us something needs attention is a negative one. Noticing these signals is not negative thinking. Doing something corrective about them is positive action. Getting upset about them is negative thinking.

The latter is what I'm suggesting you keep to a minimum.

Depression

*If the essential core of the person is denied or suppressed,
he gets sick sometimes in obvious ways, sometimes in subtle
ways, sometimes immediately, sometimes later.*

ABRAHAM MASLOW

Does all this negative thinking produce depression; or are we depressed, and the depression causes negative thinking? Which became depressed first: the chicken or the egg?

Here I'm discussing medical depression, *biological* depression, not the sort of depression we feel when we say, "The popcorn at the snack bar has too much cholesterol. I'm depressed."

Many negative thinkers can't help it. They have a physical illness known as depression. It's an imbalance in the chemical functioning of the brain. A depressed brain cannot hold a positive focus for any meaningful length of time. Negative thoughts, on the other hand, flourish.

I know whereof I speak: I was depressed from at least the age of three, but I didn't discover it until I was forty-three. (That must be some sort of record for non-self-awareness. Or denial. Probably both.) All those wonderful techniques and ideas I taught others in books, tapes, seminars, and PR appearances didn't work for me. Yes, they helped a little, but considering the time I had put in, I should have been happier than Mary Poppins. (Come to think of it, maybe Mary Poppins was a little depressed herself.) People would bump up against my anger or pain and exclaim, "I thought you wrote a book about not having negative thoughts!"

Shortly after I started treatment for depression (in 1993), the depression lifted like the proverbial veil. I felt good just being alive. I felt worthy for the first time in my adult life. Further, all the self-help stuff actually started helping. Not that life is now suddenly perfect. When I think and do negative things, I feel negative. When I think and do good things, however, I finally feel good.

Heavy thoughts bring on physical maladies.

MARTIN LUTHER
1483-1546

There are three primary kinds of depression: major depression, chronic depression, and manic depression.

Major depression has a beginning, a middle, and an end--like the flu. Unlike the flu, however, major depressions often last for months.

Chronic depression (also called dysthymia) is a long-term, low-grade depression that can go on for years. (Yes, you can have both chronic depression and major depression at the same time. This stunning state of affairs is known as double depression.)

Manic depression is the unpredictable mood swing between irrational, anxiety-ridden highs (*mania*) and cavernous, often-immobilizing lows (depression).

There are many misconceptions about depression--mostly negative. Unfortunately, because depressed people think negatively about depression and its treatment, they don't get help, which allows the depression to worsen, which leads to more negative thinking, which produces a vicious cycle of suffering.

Allow me to clear up some of the most popular myths.

1. **Depression is a mental illness.** Depression certainly affects the mind and emotions, but depression is a physical illness--like diabetes, high blood pressure, or low thyroid. Specifically, depression is the body's failure to maintain the proper level of neurotransmitters in the brain. Neurotransmitters are the fluid through which the brain communicates with its many cells. When the level of neurotransmitters is too low, communication falters, brain functioning becomes inharmonious, and depression results. It is thought the manic (hyper) phase of manic depression occurs when the level of neurotransmitters is too high.
2. **Depression cannot be easily treated.** That was true just a few years ago, but medical breakthroughs since 1987 make depression among the most easily and successfully treated of all major illnesses. The two major forms of treatment are antidepressant medication and short-term therapy (usually just fifteen to twenty sessions).

Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.

M. KATHLEEN CASEY

3. **Antidepressants are "happy pills" that change your personality.** Think of depression as a headache. If you've had a headache for months, years, or as long as you could remember, taking an aspirin and alleviating the headache will certainly make you feel better. It is, however, the same you feeling better. Antidepressants only remove depression. If you take an aspirin and don't have a headache, you won't feel much of anything. If you take an antidepressant and you don't have depression, you won't feel much of anything, either. Unlike, say, tranquilizers or pep pills, antidepressants have no mood-altering effect. When people say they're happier taking antidepressants, they are referring to the relief one naturally feels when the pain of depression lifts.
4. **Antidepressants are dangerous.** In fact, antidepressant medications are among the safest of all prescription drugs. Prozac, the most popular antidepressant, has had unparalleled negative press (more people know the side-effects of Prozac than know the symptoms of depression). This is because the Church of Scientology, for whatever reason, decided to attack Prozac with a great pile of falsehoods. More than ten million people regularly take Prozac worldwide; five million in the United States. Naturally, a handful of these people have displayed some aberrant behavior. A handful of any group of five million people will, at one time or another, display aberrant behavior. (Statistically, I'm sure it can be shown that a high percentage of mass murderers drank milk when they were growing up.) All medications have potential side effects, of course, and antidepressants are no exception. A relatively small percentage of people taking the new generation of antidepressants, however, experience any side-effects at all.
5. **Antidepressants are unnatural and unhealthy.** Not so. Antidepressants simply balance the level of neurotransmitters already in the brain. The positive effect of antidepressants comes from allowing naturally produced neurotransmitters to return to natural levels. That's all. Further, the misery of enduring depression is far more unhealthy--on all levels--than any known antidepressant side-effect.

*The problems of alcoholism and drug addiction
have strong links to depression. The search for
highs may often begin as a flight from lows.*

NATHAN S. KLINE, M.D.

6. **Healing depression means years of psychotherapy.** The two forms of therapy shown to work best in healing depression (Cognitive Therapy and Interpersonal Therapy) are both short-term, closed-ended therapies--usually lasting just fifteen to twenty sessions. Both are more "retraining" and educational than they are lying on a couch and rhapsodizing on a therapist's traditional opening line: "Tell me about your childhood." The reason some people perceive, think about, and do depressing things is that no one ever taught them a better way. These therapies are about learning a better way.
7. **If I have depression, I'm unusual.** Hardly. More than fifteen million Americans currently suffer from depression. The sad fact is that ten million of them don't

know it. These ten million go about blaming this and overreacting to that, but the true cause of their suffering, poor relationships, failure, and ill health is a biochemical imbalance in the brain (depression). The chances are one-in-five that you will have a depression at some time or another in your life.

A few additional thoughts on depression:

- People are more likely to be depressed the older they get. Those over sixty-five are four times more likely to have a depression than the general population.
- Depression is usually inherited, although the stress of life or chronic illness can cause depression, too. When I looked around my family tree and saw all the nuts growing on it, I realized I was *not* the product of the passion fruit bush (as I had always supposed).
- Many people with depression don't "feel depressed." One can suffer from depression and not feel sad, blue, or emotionally down.
- Untreated depression is the #1 cause of alcoholism, drug abuse, and other addictions.
- Depression is often an underlying cause of overeating, chronic fatigue, insomnia, headaches, bulimia, digestive disorders, aches and pains, and other physical disorders.
- Some people think they're depressed because they have difficult relationships. Perhaps they have difficult relationships because they are depressed.
- Depression inhibits the functioning of the immune system, increasing the incidence of illness and shortening life.

How to Tell if You Have Depression

According to the National Institutes of Health, if you have four or more of these symptoms for two weeks or longer, you may have depression. A diagnosis from a psychiatrist or other physician who specializes in depression is in order.

It's been troubling me. Now, why is it that most of us can talk openly about the illnesses of our bodies, but when it comes to our brain and illnesses of the mind we clam up and because we clam up, people with emotional disorders feel ashamed, stigmatized and don't seek the help that can make the difference.

KIRK DOUGLAS

Symptoms of Depression Can Include:

- Persistent sad or "empty" mood
- Loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary activities, including sex
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being "slowed down"
- Sleep disturbances (insomnia, early-morning waking, or oversleeping)

- Eating disturbances (loss of appetite and weight, or weight gain)
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Thoughts of death or suicide, suicide attempts
- Irritability
- Excessive crying
- Chronic aches and pains that don't respond to treatment

Physical and social functioning are impaired by depression to a greater degree than by hypertension, diabetes, angina, arthritis, gastrointestinal diseases, lung problems, or back ailments.

JOS M. SANTIAGO, M.D.
JOURNAL OF CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY
November, 1993

In the Workplace, Symptoms of Depression Often May Be Recognized by:

- Decreased productivity
- Morale problems
- Lack of cooperation
- Safety problems, accidents
- Absenteeism
- Frequent complaints of being tired all the time
- Complaints of unexplained aches and pains
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Symptoms of Mania Can Include
- Excessively "high" mood
- Irritability
- Decreased need for sleep
- Increased talking, moving, and sexual activity
- Racing thoughts
- Disturbed ability to make decisions
- Grandiose notions
- Being easily distracted

To find out more, please read a book I wrote with [Harold H. Bloomfield](#), M.D., *How to Heal Depression*. Available at your local bookstore, library, or by calling 1-800-LIFE-101.

Freedom from Addiction

He who has begun has half done. Dare to be wise; begin!.

HORACE
65-68 B.C.

Mysteriously and in ways that are totally remote from natural experience, the gray drizzle of horror induced by depression takes on the quality of physical pain.

WILLIAM STYRON

Negative thinking is a bad habit. For many people it's an addiction. An addiction means some behavior is on automatic--it has control over you; you do not have control over it.

If you think you're not addicted to negative thinking, challenge yourself--put the book down, go about your life, and don't think a negative thought for the next hour. Starting now. Not one negative thought. Go.

ONE HOUR LATER . . .

How did you do? Now don't kid yourself by saying, "Oh, I only noticed the negative. You said that was okay." Is that *all* you did? Did you start to get upset about any of the negativity you noticed? If you did, you were doing more than noticing. You were adding to the noticing. What you were adding was negative thinking.

If you were unable to meet that challenge, you might want to take a good, honest look at how much control negative thinking has over your life.

Breaking addictions is not an easy process. If it were, they wouldn't be addictions. For the nonsmoker to give up cigarettes is easy; for the pack-a-day smoker, it's not. One is addicted; the other isn't.

If at first you don't succeed you're running about average.

M. H. ALDERSON

For some, giving up negative thinking may be a snap. They're not addicted--they've been thinking negatively just because they thought they should, that there was some good to be gotten from it. On learning they can get along marvelously without negative thoughts, these people just walk away from them. All they needed was permission.

For others, moving from automatic negative thinking to manual positive focusing is going to be a challenge--maybe the greatest challenge of their lives. And perhaps the challenge of life itself.

It's going to take time, perseverance, patience, forgiveness, determination, discipline, fortitude, enthusiasm, support, endurance and, above all, love. Love for yourself, love for the process, love for what you're creating in place of the addiction and, yes, even love for the addiction itself.

The past few years have seen a steady increase in the number of people playing music in the streets. The past few years have also seen a steady increase in the number of malignant diseases. Are these two facts related?.

FRAN LEBOWITZ

Part Three

LATCH ON TO THE A-FIRM-A-TIVE

Alas, I know if I ever became truly humble, I would be proud of it.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Now we're ready for the really good stuff--the affirmations of living, loving, health, wealth, happiness, and joy.

I'm not sure what Johnny Mercer meant by "latch on to" in the lyric of his song. I doubt if he meant "become attached to." I certainly don't mean it that way. If joy, loving, and happiness become new "shoulds," "musts," and "have-tos," we are, once again, "doomed before we even take the vow."

Humans have a natural ability to want, desire, aspire, yearn, and long for. Any attempt to diminish this natural desire I find (a) counterproductive, (b)frustrating, and (c) so improbable it borders on the impossible.

Some people desire desirelessness with such a passion that it actually increases their ability to desire. What we do we become stronger in, and these people yearn so much and so often to have no more yearning that their ability to yearn becomes astronomical.

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, Or what's a heaven for?.

ROBERT BROWNING

I see nothing wrong with the human trait to desire. In fact, I consider it integral to our success mechanism. Becoming attached to what we desire is what causes the trouble. If

you must have it in order to be happy, then you are denying the happiness of here and now.

If, however, you're focusing on the positive aspects of the reality around you while traveling in the direction you want to go, I see no problem with that at all. In fact, it sounds to me like a pleasant, productive way to live.

Rather than trying to diminish desire, I suggest you desire what you really want more of. Desire happiness. Aspire to gratitude. Long for health. Crave compassion. Seek satisfaction. Lust after God (however and whatever you perceive God to be). Want to love yourself, others, and everything around you more and more each day.

These are laudable goals. They're also fun, challenging, exciting, and not only within your grasp, but also within your reach.

A Is for Acceptance

*All nature is but art unknown to thee, All chance, direction
which thou canst not see; All discord, harmony not
understood; All partial evil, universal good; And, spite of
pride, in erring reason's spite, One truth is clear, Whatever
is, is right.*

ALEXANDER POPE

Acceptance is such an important part of happiness, contentment, health, and growth that some people have called it "the first law of personal growth."

The world goes on, people do what they do, events come and go, and, for the most part, our only choice in all this is, "Do I accept it or not?" If we accept it, we flow with it. We allow life to do what it's already doing.

If we refuse to accept it, we usually feel pressure, pain, frustration, anxiety, and dis-ease. We struggle with what is. The struggle, for the most part, takes place within us--where it also does the most harm.

Acceptance is not the same as liking, or being happy about, or even condoning. It is simply seeing something the way it is and saying, "That's the way it is." It's seeing what's going on and saying, "That's what's going on." It's looking at something that's happening and saying, "That's what's happening."

Acceptance is realizing that to do other than accept is (a) painful and (b) futile. Through nonacceptance we try to control the world. We want our "shoulds," "musts," and demands to rule the world.

It doesn't work. It simply does not work.

The more the marble wastes, the more the statue grows.

MICHELANGELO

To prove how futile the struggle to control the world, get up tomorrow at 4 a.m. and try to keep the sun from rising. Do everything you can to keep it from coming up. Struggle madly. Use all your power, influence, money, friends, and political connections to help. You won't be able to delay its scheduled ascension for so much as a millisecond.

Maybe you don't want to control the turning of the earth; you just want to control the world around you. Good luck on that one, too. The truth is, we sometimes can't even control ourselves--that part of the universe we have the most direct influence over. If we can't control our own thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions, how can we hope to control others?

Nature goes on being nature in its own natural way. We have very little control over it. What do we have control over? The space within the skin of our body. We can work to make that environment as loving, joyful, peaceful, and delightful as we like. That in itself is a lifelong project--and a worthy one, too.

The rest--the outer environment--does what it does. There's not much more to do than say, "It's doing what it's doing."

When we set out to change a small fraction of the outer universe we *do* have some ability to change, one of the best starting points is acceptance. The sculptor begins by accepting the block of marble as it is, and then removes everything that isn't a statue. When asked how to sculpt a horse, one artist explained, "I see the horse in the stone; then I take away everything that is not the horse."

Michelangelo's David was carved from a flawed block of marble. Another sculptor had begun work on the block and abandoned it. There was a deep gash in the side, making the stone "unacceptable" to sculptors for decades. Michelangelo, however, accepted the marble--gash and all--and created one of the marvels of humanity.

We begin with acceptance and move from there. This includes acceptance of ourselves. We are, please remember, a part of nature. We can be as contrary as a thunderstorm on a picnic. That "natural" part of us has its own rhythms, its own timelines, and its own agenda. While bringing this "animal" under control, we must learn to accept it.

This "natural" part of us most people call the body, and that's accurate, providing that you remember the body includes the brain that thinks the thoughts and the nerves that feel the feelings. Thoughts and feelings are a necessary part of the human animal.

The "natural" part of us thinks the Fight or Flight Response is terrific. Eons of genetics have told it so. We now must gradually convince "it" that the Love and Acceptance Response is more valuable for our survival as an animal.

This "convincing" we call education. The source of the word is educare, "to lead forth from within." It's the gradual process of leading from within rather than being led from without.

In that process of teaching acceptance, we must practice acceptance. Set a good example for yourself. Learn to accept whatever you do. This, of course, is not carte blanche to run roughshod over others or to hurt yourself. It's just a realization that, being human, we're going to do things we're not going to like (and by "doing," I mean all levels of doing, including thoughts and feelings), and we might as well accept those, too.

There is no good in arguing with the inevitable. The only argument available with an east wind is to put on your overcoat.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

Learn to accept even your lack of acceptance. When you're not accepting something, accept your nonacceptance of it. Can't accept your nonacceptance? Then accept the fact that you can't accept your nonacceptance. If the bad stuff like guilt can pile up in layers (feeling guilty about feeling guilty about feeling guilty), so can the good stuff (accepting the fact that you can't accept your nonacceptance).

Yes, it gets funny, and it certainly can be fun. That's one of the keynotes of acceptance: a sense of lightness. As you accept the heaviness, you begin to feel "the unbearable lightness of being." Accept that, too. No: welcome it.

With acceptance, you can't set some things aside and say, "I'll accept these, but not those." Acceptance is unconditional. You can like one thing more than another--that's preference--but acceptance means not excepting anything. Actually, it's easier that way. You don't have to remember what to and what not to accept. If it is, accept it. Simple.

Schedule acceptance breaks throughout the day. Give yourself an acceptance break right now. Accept everything around you, everything inside you, everything about everything. Accept your thoughts. Accept your thoughts about your thoughts. Accept your thoughts about your thoughts about your thoughts. Accept whatever feelings you have, the sensations in your body. Don't try to change any of it--trying to change is a form of nonacceptance.

*I travel light; as light, That is, as a man can travel who will
Still carry his body around because Of its sentimental
value.*

CHRISTOPHER FRY

Accept your surroundings, your physical environment. Accept your room, its furnishings, the smells, the sounds, and the occupants. Accept your thoughts about what's there and about what's not there. Accept your memories, fantasies, demands, and opinions about how it should be.

Accept all the things you did but wish you didn't do and all the things you didn't do but wish you did. Notice that these decisions about what's hot and what's not about an activity (or inactivity) are thoughts, too. Accepting thoughts--including the negative ones--is an important step toward greater joy.

And greater health.

Observe

To be conscious that we are perceiving or thinking is to be conscious of our own existence.

ARISTOTLE

To become the spectator of one's own life is to escape the suffering of life.

OSCAR WILDE

Observation is a pathway to acceptance. To observe is to think, feel, taste, smell, see, and hear without attachment, without attempting to manipulate the outcome, without taking sides.

All you do is observe. Simply "be with" whatever information your senses present to you. If your mind goes off on judgments and evaluations, observe that. Don't get involved with the thoughts; don't try to change them; just observe them.

As you learn to observe, you become more in touch with that part of you that's you. When you stand back and observe, you'll begin to experience a you that isn't your mind and its thoughts, isn't the emotions and their feelings, and isn't the body and its sensations.

This existence of *you* is hard to communicate, because I have to use words, which are decoded by the mind, and the mind does not like to relinquish its authority or to admit that there's something more basic to you than it.

You'll understand by doing. After fifteen or so minutes of consciously observing, you may begin to notice the part that's doing the observing.

Give yourself a period of time in which you won't be disturbed. Decide for that period of time to do nothing but observe. Sit or lie comfortably. Now, be still and be.

The mind will present "good ideas" to do something else. Don't do anything about them; just observe them. The feelings will want something more exciting to feel about. Don't fulfill them; observe them. The body will demand attention. Don't attend to it; just observe the demands.

*I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive,
recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the
window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her
hair.*

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

If you want to change positions, don't. Just observe the desire to change positions. If you have an itch, don't scratch it. Observe the itch. Your mind, body, and emotions may throw little--and sometimes not so little--temper tantrums. Observe the tantrums. Observe the inner kicking and screaming. These (or the fear of these) may be what has controlled you for some time. Gain authority over them. You gain authority by doing none of the actions they demand you do. Just sit and observe.

The game is this: The mind, body, and emotions say, "I'm going to get you to move before the fifteen minutes (or whatever time you set for yourself) is over." You say, "No, I'm not." And the game begins. You may say, "Oh, it's easy not to move for fifteen minutes." Most games look easy from the sidelines. Play the game and see.

If it's easy, congratulations! If it's not, don't be surprised. The things that trouble you during this process are probably the same things that trouble you in life: the "shoulds," "musts," "have-tos," and demands of your mind, body, and emotions.

The solution? Observation. Simply observe. You'll learn a lot about yourself. And, you'll learn a lot about the parts of yourself that aren't your self.

You can, if you like, extend the "sitting observation" to "moving observation." As you move through life, observe it. Observe your reactions.

Observation is a primary tool of awareness. The more you observe what you're now unaware of, the more aware you become.

Behold: consciousness.

Patience

*Thinking to get at once all the gold the goose could give, he
killed it and opened it only to find --nothing.*

AESOP

There is a saying that has found its way onto plaques, posters, buttons, bumper stickers, mugs, T-shirts, and balloons. Any idea with such universal appeal must have more than a modicum of truth. This saying does.

Be patient. God isn't finished with me yet.

Patience is our compassion for the distance between what we are now and what we know we can be.

Because we have such fertile imaginations, we can envision ourselves scaling mountains one moment and swimming oceans the next. To get from the mountaintop to the beach, however, takes a certain amount of time. If we're on the mountain and want to go to the ocean, that's fine. But if we strike against ourselves for not being at the ocean right now, we're being impatient.

Most people reading this book have already formed a mental image of what the "perfect, healthy, positively focusing" person "should" be. You may have formed such an image, and you also may have cast yourself as the star of the production. Great! (Or, in show-biz terminology: Bravo!) The only minor challenge, then, is how we get from where we are to where we want to be.

But if you're putting undue pressure on yourself to achieve these goals of perfection, health, and positivity--impatience has crept in.

*No thing great is created suddenly, any more than a bunch
of grapes or a fig. If you tell me that you desire a fig, I
answer you that there must be time. Let it first blossom,
then bear fruit, then ripen.*

EPICETUS 50-120

Relax. Life is a lifelong journey. You'll never get out of it alive. You'll never be "done." You're fine just as you are. You're not finished with yourself, and never will be. I've yet to meet a person who has declared, "I'm done!" Humans have desires, dreams, and goals beyond their current reality, no matter how magnificent that reality might be. It's part of the human condition.

Realize, then, that the journey from here to there will never be completed. Such is life. Have compassion for the distance between where you are now and where you're going next. (Where you are now, remember, is the goal of a former moment in time.)

Patience is enjoying the journey. It's not climbing the mountain to get to the top; it's climbing the mountain to enjoy the climb. Enjoy the process of your life. The travel ads claim, "Getting there is half the fun," and as Robert Townsend corrected: "Getting there is *all* the fun."

Dear God, I pray for patience. And I want it right now!.

OREN ARNOLD

Besides, if you don't have fun while getting there, you probably won't have much fun when you arrive. Your joy muscles will have atrophied. You will have learned to postpone fun so well that you'll postpone it until your next destination. ("I can't wait to go on vacation." "I can't wait to get home.")

Another popular saying is "Let go and let God." Letting go is relaxing. Letting God is being patient. Relax and be patient. What a great prescription for enjoying life.

When you learn patience with yourself, it's easy to extend it to others. When you learn patience with others, be sure to extend it to yourself.

Realize that, right now, everything is the way it "should" be, and when later comes, everything will be "perfect" then, too.

What is patience? Enjoying the moment. How does one enjoy the moment? By being patient. An endless loop? Sure. And you can jump in at any point.

Because life and negative thinking can be the most life-threatening "illness" of all. Everyone can benefit from this man's funny, quirky approach to choosing life over death, choosing happiness over negativity. I cannot truly express how thankful I am to have found this book and to have incorporated its teachings into my life. He focusses his philosophy in the claim "Negative thinking is a luxury we cant afford to". That is very true: You *may* think negatively in your life, if youre rich, happy, healthy, and well. But if youre not, think about thinking positively. It's called "You Can't Afford the Luxury of a Negative Thought", by Peter McWilliams, and you can buy it online! While some self-help books can be long winded, dry, or just plain confusing, this book is so easy to read, understand and apply. Each chapter is only about two pages long. You can read it in any order. A couple chapters a day is enough to ruminate on. It is full of tools to use that help you focus on the positive. Other writers who have greatly influenced me are: Marianne Williamson (I used to listen to her audiotapes everyday in the car!) Louise L. Hay ("You Can Heal Your Life") A