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## Navigating Negativity: An Optimistic Approach

*The Power of Positive Thinking* was a revelation when Dr. Norman Vincent Peale's classic self-help book debuted in 1952. Now, over 60 years since we started seeing the glass half-full as the secret to happiness, positive thinking as a success strategy is more popular than ever. In an era where personal and professional reinvention is all the rage, the party line is that whatever you want – a fit body, your soul mate, the corner office, you name it – can be yours if you show zero tolerance for nay-saying and focus exclusively on what is possible. Pay no attention to doubt and fear. Just vividly picture your dreams, fiercely affirm your deservedness, and your desires will manifest.

Positive Psychology, a relatively new movement in the behavioral sciences that studies the ingredients of advanced mental health, highlights the potency of a rose-colored perspective in accelerating performance. Identifying and channeling natural personal strengths, rather than pushing against the grain by striving to overcome weaknesses, is a smoother and more time-efficient way to excel. Recognizing and applying what is already working is a quicker route to transformation than lamenting what's wrong and broken. But as social critic Barbara Ehrenreich asserts in her provocative book *Bright-sided*, positive thinking has a definite downside when taken too far. Not only can tireless cheerfulness lead us to ignore inconvenient yet important truths and skip over painful yet character-building growth experiences, it is utterly off-putting to those of us who prefer to confront rather than repress reality.

As we all know, too much negativity is draining, deflating, and downright depressing. But too much positivity can lead to denial, avoidance, and dangerous oversights. The key is to strike a healthy balance between needless catastrophizing and inflated confidence. What's required, in other words, is true optimism, which is the measured capacity to step back and be objective, distill significance from positive and negative extremes, and steer what's relevant into a promising future.

Here are four general steps of optimism in action:

### 1. See the full picture.

Rarely is one particular theory or approach all right or all wrong, and so the practiced optimist sits back and listens, observes, notes, mulls over, and then selects the most fruitful advice and channels it into a workable strategy. In the spirit of real diversity, an optimistic trouble-shooter brings in a few experts with wildly opposing takes on a particular topic and hears them out. When divergent perspectives are culled for what resonates, what originates is eclectic resolution encompassing what's best from the spectrum.

### 2. Find value in cynicism.

Optimists know that people who look at the downside, as demoralizing as they can be at times, are essential to success because they alert us to vital caveats. Having your enthusiasm interrupted is never fun, but the injection of important warnings and considerations into the mix is incremental to full readiness. When a pessimist puts the brakes on by asking

what we'll do if it rains, if we run out of money, if it takes longer than we think, or if our proposal gets turned down, we are forced to take a hard look at what we're doing, find and fix holes, and become sufficiently prepared for the worst case scenario. The beauty of pessimism is that it reins us in when we're too pie-in-the-sky and invites necessary pragmatism and down-to-earthness to the table.

### 3. Offer a chair.

Optimists understand that emotional experience, though not always pleasant, is tantamount to personal and professional development. And so when someone is in the throes of upset feelings, an optimistic person makes ample time and space for processing. The only way to get from emotional upheaval to calm and clarity is through it, and patient empathy is the catalyst. As my friend in customer service puts it, "Let the distressed person climb mount anger, and when they've complained all the way to the top, you can step in with possible solutions."

### 4. Switch gears when enough is enough.

Optimists are open-minded about negativity only until the wet blanket has been given fair floor time and sufficient venting has occurred. When a conversation turns to familiar droning about a seemingly intractable circumstance, an optimistic person directs the conversation to a new place by asking, "What have you done, or what can you do, to try and make the situation better?" or "In a perfect world, if you had unlimited resources and power, what would you do to solve the problem?" When a chronic complainer starts belly-aching, the optimistic companion intervenes with, "What do you hope to accomplish with our conversation today?," "Tell me three positive things that have happened since we last talked," or "What personal skill can you apply to make your situation better?" As Dr. Peale knew well, the real power of positive thinking lies in the potential it opens up with a provocative line of inquiry.

We are pleased to congratulate our friend, mentor, and partner

**JULIAN SWEET, ESQ.**

on his retirement.

We thank him for 38 years of legal excellence.

