

Is Your Glass Half Full?
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“Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see the shadow.” Helen Keller

I find it amazing that so many positive quotes have come from the work and life of Helen Keller. She is well known for her tenacity, intelligence, and positive outlook on life. Research now shows that Ms. Keller’s long life was likely due, at least in part, to her positive attitude.

In 2013, the journal of the American Heart Association cited research showing that even for people dealing with heart disease, a positive outlook proved to offer patients a longer and stronger life. The study looked at 607 patients in a Denmark hospital and found that patients whose moods were deemed more positive were 58% more likely to live at least another five years. This same group of positive patients tended to exercise more as well!

A positive outlook, positive thinking, and optimism in general, have proven to have a wide variety of health benefits including:

- Increased life span
- Lower rates of depression
- Lower levels of stress
- Greater resistance to the common cold
- Better psychological and physical well-being
- Reduced risk of death from cardiovascular disease
- Better coping skills during hardships and times of stress. *(Source: MayoClinic.org/Healthy-Lifestyle/stress-management)*

Remaining positive is important to healthy living throughout your entire life. I recently presented a program to senior citizens about the importance of positive thinking in relation to healthy aging. I conveyed the importance of having a positive attitude as it relates to both physical functioning as well as mental health. Your attitude affects how successful you are in achieving personal and professional goals. It affects how you look and feel both mentally and physically. It’s important to your interpersonal relationships because attitude affects both what you say AND what you do.

How do you know if you are generally an optimistic person, or one who has a positive attitude? In their publication titled “Positive Attitude”, aging specialists Dr. Erin Yelland, May Hosier, and LaVona Traywick offer these self-reflection questions as a guide:

- ? Am I optimistic, easygoing, or extroverted?
- ? Am I willing to learn, no matter how difficult it is?
- ? Do I laugh a lot or have a sense of humor by not taking myself too seriously?
- ? Do I express emotions rather than bottle them up?
- ? Do I do my best when studying or working and try to improve how I look at my work?
- ? Do I demonstrate enthusiasm in whatever I say or do?
- ? Do I welcome challenges, experiments, or try new things?

(Source: Keys to Embracing Aging: Positive Attitude; K-State Research and Extension publication MF3256)

Being a positive person doesn't mean that you are naive about life's challenges or are ignoring reality. Rather, it means you look for the glass to be half-full. You create an internal filter that allows you to leave much of the "junk", or negativity, outside of your thoughts. You look at a positive and productive way to approach these challenges head-on.

If you find that you struggle with maintaining a positive attitude, don't despair, you can retrain your brain to think in a more positive way. Just like any other change you make in your life, you have to practice and be intentional about your efforts to change.

Here are some ideas about how to train your brain to embrace a more positive attitude!

Filtering. When you have a pessimistic or negative attitude, it's easy to magnify and focus on the negative aspects of a situation. Be intentional about leaving the negative thoughts on the outside and absorb the positive things. For example, instead of thinking about all the things you didn't get done at work yesterday, think about the fewer things you have to get done today because you were able to tackle what you did!

Personalizing. My oldest son likes to "own" everything – he says "I'm sorry" for everything that goes astray around him. I keep telling him that he isn't responsible for me forgetting to pick up milk, but he still makes an apology when I comment "I forgot to pick up milk today." Personalizing everything – assuming that when something bad happens, it's your fault – is a habit that supports negative thinking. When faced with a problem or bad situation, try asking yourself "Do I really own this?" If the answer is "no" – then let it go and mentally walk away from it.

Catastrophizing. Closely related to personalizing, catastrophizing means that you automatically jump to the worst case scenario with or without having all the information. This contributes to a negative mind set, as well. Rather than seeing the worst, jump past that to thinking about a positive solution. What can be done that will provide the best outcome for all involved? Be intentional to step up and step out with a positive approach to move toward a better situation. A phrase my dad often said was "You can either be part of the problem, or part of the solution." Choose to be part of the solution!

Polarizing. When you polarize, it means you see things only as good or bad – with no middle ground. You may feel that you have to be perfect or you're a total failure. Instead of looking at what is behind you, change your sites on what is ahead of you. What can you do now to improve yourself or the situation? Focus on the positive steps and goals you can make to move forward.

Consider Helen Keller's life story. She was a blind and deaf person who learned to speak, read, and communicate with such proficiency that she became the first deafblind person to earn a bachelor's degree. It's not hard to conclude that she most certainly gained much from her

positive outlook. *"Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope and confidence."* Helen Keller. Perhaps that's why she lived to nearly 88 wise and wonderful years of age.

For more information on maintain a healthier lifestyle, contact me at the Geary County Extension office 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!