“When life hands you lemons, make lemonade.”

The first time you heard that, you might have shrugged it off as an overly upbeat bumper sticker. Yet there is an important truth in that slogan: a positive attitude can make an enormous difference in a person’s life.

What is a Positive Attitude?
Life has plenty of good and bad moments for all of us. A person with a positive attitude tends to focus on:

• What is good about life, instead of what is bad about it.
• What they want to have happen, not what they fear will happen.
• What they can do, rather than what they can’t do.
• What they have to feel thankful for, not what they have to complain about.

What is a Negative Attitude?
A person with a negative attitude tends to believe or act upon some of the following statements:

• I’m a victim of circumstances I cannot control.
• I must excel in all I do. If I don’t, I am not worth anything.
• I just know it won’t work.
• Nothing good can come of this.
• I’m sure the news is going to be bad. It always is.
• I shouldn’t have to tell people what I want—if they were paying attention, they’d be able to figure it out.
• Life would be better if people would just start acting right.

Often, a negative attitude boils down to a simple assumption: “I’ll be miserable if I don’t get what I want when I want it.”
Developing a Positive Attitude

Why Have A Positive Attitude?
Let’s face it. Sometimes life doesn’t treat us very well. Why shouldn’t we complain? Don’t we have a right to be truly miserable sometimes? Yes! Sometimes, the best thing we can do is feel sad, hurt, scared or angry—and let someone know we’re feeling that way.

We don’t have to deny pain in order to have a positive attitude. A positive attitude in painful times can involve paying attention to those aspects of life that are still good. It also helps to look for an opportunity to learn from problems and painful circumstances. You can do these things even while you are feeling sad, hurt, scared or angry.

Having a positive attitude can offer you a multitude of benefits, including:

- A more pleasant, cooperative family and work life.
- Better health.
- A happier, less depressed emotional state.
- A calmer physical state.
- More energy.
- Positive responses from people in general.

Fortunately, you don’t have to be an optimist from birth to cash in on these benefits. You can develop a more positive attitude by learning to:

1. Keep your focus positive.
2. Change your negative thoughts to positive thoughts.
3. Approach your problems constructively.

Keep Your Focus Positive
There are several ways to do this:

- **Pay attention to the words you use.** For example, replace the word “can’t” with the word “can.” When you run into a problem, focus on the steps you can take. Tell people what you plan to do or want to do to ease the situation or find a solution. Don’t waste time and energy complaining.

- **Keep a written list of goals you want to achieve.** Your goals might range from “a warm relationship with my spouse” to “improve my eating habits.” Once you have a list, put your goals in order of priority. Read it each morning. Take small steps that will help you move toward your goals each week. This way, you’re focusing on getting where you want to be, not on being unhappy about where you are.

- **Expect the best from others.** People often act the way we expect them to act. Speak well of others and offer words of encouragement. Don’t gossip or gripe. If you want a change in someone’s behavior, tell them in positive terms what you want them to do.

- **Keep a gratitude list.** This is a variation on the old saying “count your blessings.” Any time you’re thankful for something, write it on your list.
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- **Use humor and laughter.** When you’re feeling negative, try to find something funny about the situation or make a joke.

- **Think about how you can help others.** Can you brighten someone’s life today? If you can, it’s guaranteed that you’ll also brighten your own.

### Change Your Negative Thoughts to Positive Thoughts

The way you think affects the way you feel. Let’s say you often wake up in the morning with a headache. A negative thought would be: “I can’t stand having these headaches anymore. Why do I have to suffer like this?”

A more positive thought would be: “I wonder why I keep waking up with headaches. I’ll check with my doctor to see if something is wrong physically. Maybe I’m going to sleep too tense these days. Perhaps I can learn some relaxation techniques so I wake up feeling better.”

Negative thinking makes you feel angry, resentful and depressed. Positive thinking gives you a feeling of hope and motivation.

Here are five steps toward positive thinking:

1. Whenever you’re aware of an unpleasant feeling, write the feeling down. (Depressed, angry, frustrated, worried, etc.)

2. Now, look at what you are thinking. Write down the thought. (For example: “I’m sick and tired of always having to work late. I’m frustrated because I’m going to be starving for dinner by the time I get home and I won’t have time to exercise again. Why do I always get into situations like this?”)

3. Examine your thoughts. Are they unrealistic or unreasonable? Are you making a mountain out of a molehill? Would it help to wait until you know all the facts before you waste energy worrying? If so, try replacing your negative thoughts with more positive thoughts. (For example, “Working late has become a habit. I need to look at my workload and talk to my boss to see if there is anything I can delay to a more reasonable deadline.”)

4. Sometimes negative thoughts are justified. For example, let’s say that your boss says there is a big project and they really need you on it. This extra work means it’s likely you’ll have to work late more often in the coming weeks. In this situation, you’d be perfectly justified in feeling frustrated. On the other hand, you might think more positive thoughts such as, “This is a temporary situation and I can get through it. I can ask my boss if I can give Susan another project to help ease the load.”

5. Write down your positive thoughts. Read and reread them. Try to etch them in your brain. Keep practicing. It may take several days or weeks before you notice a change. But with practice, you can become a positive thinker. It’s a little like learning to play a new sport or a musical instrument. Expertise comes little by little.

### Approach Your Problems Positively

Everyone has problems. When a major problem occurs, many of us have a tendency to say something like:

- Oh, come on!
- Go away and don’t tell me this.
- This is awful!
- I can’t stand it!
- (Expletive)
- Why did this have to happen to me?
Developing a Positive Attitude

These reactions are very natural. But such reactions can make it harder to find a solution to the problem. Here are some alternatives:

• I don’t like this one bit, but I’m going to make the best of it.
• I’m going to learn a lot about it in the next couple of weeks.
• I will grow from this problem.
• This situation is a problem but I will rise to the challenge.
• I’ll practice a quick relaxation. When I feel tense, I’ll take some deep breaths.
• I don’t think I can handle this by myself. I’ll call a friend, family member, or someone else that I know can help.

What Next?
We’ve given you lots of ideas. If you’d like to take some action toward a more positive attitude, you’ll probably do best if you take just one step. Here are some possibilities to get you started:

☐ Keep the benefits of positive thinking in mind. My personal benefits are: ____________________________________________

☐ Keep my focus positive by using positive words, such as: _______________________________________________________

☐ Keep my focus positive by making a list of goals I want to achieve in my life. The top item on my list is: ____________

☐ Keep my focus positive by expecting the best of, speaking well of, and encouraging others.
☐ Keep my focus positive by using a gratitude list.
☐ Keep my focus positive by using humor.
☐ Keep my focus positive by looking for ways to brighten other people’s days.
☐ Change my negative thoughts to positive thoughts by applying the five steps to positive thinking.
☐ Approach my problems positively as opportunities to grow and challenges I can successfully meet.
☐ Talk with a trusted friend, family member, or other person if I need help with a negative attitude or a problem that seems too tough to handle alone.

*Like any new habit, start with that first step and keep moving forward.*
*A positive attitude tends to grow on its own once it’s given a good start!*

This information is intended for educational purposes only and should not be interpreted as medical advice. Please consult your doctor for advice about changes that may affect your health.