

Positivity is no trivial pursuit

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Far from being a simple distraction from solving your problems, positivity is crucial to survival in the face of adversity, writes **MAUREEN GAFFNEY**

THE DILEMMAS of the “squeezed middle” fit the classic definition of stress. The demands on you are too much, yet they cannot be ignored or resisted. You can’t go on, but you must go on. Stress and powerlessness are a deadly combination.

The most damaging stressors are these events that change not just your life circumstances for the worse but also threaten your identity, how you think about yourself and your aspirations.

What makes it worse is that many of the current squeezed middle are barely a generation away from modest backgrounds. How can they find a way to cope psychologically with the setbacks and losses they are suffering?

Coping used to be thought of primarily as finding a way to manage the inevitable negative emotions that accompany stress: anxiety, anger, deep disappointment. And that remains important. But new research evidence on the importance of positive emotions has forced a radical rethink.

Building your capacity for positive emotions may seem a distraction from the real pressures you are facing, but feeling positive – particularly under great pressure – is not trivial. It can have a profound effect on how your brain operates and how you cope.

Resilience during periods of stress relies on the ability to actively rebalance positive and negative emotions. Set-backs and crises inevitably increase negativity. But we can still survive and recover if we maintain the right balance between the two. That balance protects us from falling below a critical threshold and plunging into a downward spiral from which it is hard to recover.

Negative emotions are designed to narrow your entire focus to the immediate threat you face by capturing your attention and keeping it stuck there. But negative emotions can leak into every other aspect of your thinking – constantly prodding your mind back to worrying.

That kind of narrow focus is fine in the short term, as you confront an immediate life-threatening event. But it can become utterly debilitating if you are dealing over a long period with a complex set of chronic problems that require all your ingenuity to resolve.

Positive emotions have the exact opposite effect of negative emotions. They expand your attention, increase your openness to new ideas, making you in turn less defensive as you tackle difficult issues.

They reduce the likelihood that you will ignore or distort information that you don’t like or does not fit in with your preconceptions.

Feeling positive helps you persist in efforts to solve your problems but at the same time prompts you to disengage faster from things that can’t be solved and turn your attention to things that can.

It increases your capacity to relate well to other people, to negotiate effectively and to avoid destructive interpersonal conflicts. So positive emotions make you more cognitively, behaviourally and socially flexible.

But that’s not all. Even the smallest surge of positive emotion can undo the most complex and hidden stress reactions happening in your body. The effects of chronic stress on your psychological and physical health are well documented.

Stress raises your blood pressure and prolonged cardiovascular reactivity is a precursor to heart disease and stroke. However, if you experience even a mild positive emotion immediately after a stressful situation, it

brings your blood pressure back to normal and calms your heart rate. It dampens the inflammatory response, reduces the level of stress hormones and strengthens your immune functioning. Finally, it increases the levels of hormones that promote closer relationships with others, which in turn will calm you further.

Over time, a steady build-up of positive emotions creates a powerful reserve of personal resources. Far from being an optional accessory, or even a distraction from solving your real problems, building your capacity for experiencing positive emotions is a crucial part of surviving, recovering and even flourishing in the face of adversity.

Of course, you can't talk yourself – or be browbeaten by others – into “being positive”. When you feel stressed, that kind of pressure is counterproductive. Rather, the strategy should be to gradually think your way through your emotional reactions, to become familiar with the basic positive emotions. Systematically begin to pay attention to anything in your day – however small – that evokes these positive reactions.

But you need to have a conscious, active plan to do that because your attention is a limited resource and negative emotions have automatic first call on it.

Your attention is a powerful resource. Whatever you pay attention to – including your positive or negative emotional reactions – will grow and develop. Whatever you don't pay attention to withers. A simple axiom of human functioning but one we easily forget.

During the boom years, it was easy to feel positive – to feel proud of your achievements and buoyant about the future. In a recession, you no longer have easy access to such emotions. So you have to look in a new way at the whole range of positive emotions and to find different ways to experience them than you did during the good times.

Feeling proud and joyful may once have been linked to success in your job or your business, but now you can link it to the resourcefulness you and your family are showing.

Unless you consciously set out to pay deliberate attention to the 10 positive emotions, you will miss the opportunity to experience them, to become more aware of what triggers them, and to structure your life in such a way that you can interact with them more frequently and more intensely.

But this is not some kind of moral injunction to “count your blessings” and stop complaining. That would just be another burden.

The point, instead, is to find joy, consolation and hope in your ordinary life; to notice, identify and assemble your psychological resources and build your resilience. It is a project by and for yourself.

So start by looking at the list below. But don't do this passively.

As you read each one, ask yourself two questions: when and where do I experience those emotions in my life? And how can I increase the frequency and intensity of each of these emotions day to day?

LOVE

Feeling drawn to somebody, relishing the pleasure at seeing them or talking to them. Or loving something you are doing in the moment.

JOY

Feeling delighted when something – however small – has gone well or better than you expected.

GRATITUDE

Feeling thankful to someone who has gone out of their way to help you or to do you a favour. Feeling lucky that something good has come your way.

CONTENTMENT

Feeling at ease, at peace or that something – however small – has gone just right.

INTEREST

Feeling interested, drawn to something new. Exploring some new idea, some new possibility. Wanting to learn and find out more.

HOPE

Even when worried and fearing the worst, still longing for things to get better and believing things can change in a positive way. Finding the resources in yourself to keep going and turn things around.

PRIDE

Feeling you have achieved something, that you did something successfully or made a difference to somebody, or left a positive mark, however small. Feeling confident and on top of things, even momentarily. Relishing those surges of confidence and feeling you might be capable of even greater achievements.

GOOD HUMOUR

Feeling amused at something that is unexpected or a bit incongruous, but not in any way threatening to you or anybody else. Smiling, laughing, feeling light and taken out of yourself.

INSPIRATION

Feeling uplifted by an example of human excellence, big or small. Seeing or hearing about someone acting better than you ever imagined possible. Noticing things that prompt you to do good yourself, to be at your best.

AWE

Feeling overwhelmed by human goodness, by heroism or courage, or by something beautiful or even miraculous in nature, in art or in life. Being ready to be stopped in your tracks, humbled in a positive way, taken out of your day-to-day concerns and out of yourself. Playing back those experiences to yourself and recounting them to family and friends.

Some of these emotions will come easily to you; others can be more of a struggle. But you can build and increase your capacity for all of them. As you do, you will feel better able to deal with the challenges facing you because feeling positive has the immediate effect of orienting you towards the future.

It helps you to stop comparing the present to the past and encourages you instead to compare the present to the possible. You are then much less likely to make mistakes and miss opportunities that are emerging. You are better able to redefine and revitalise your most cherished life goals in the light of what's now possible.

You may no longer be able to work in your old career or business, or help your children financially or plan a big adventure in your retirement. But instead of getting stuck in regret and despondency, you will be more motivated to ask yourself a more empowering set of questions: thinking of all the possibilities, how can I continue to feel competent and use all my talents? How can I redefine success? How can I help my children have a good life – and what do I mean by that? How can I create happiness and openness to the new in myself?

And when this recession ends, as it inevitably will, you will be still standing, still happy and ready for the future.