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Embracing Negative Thinking

by Jillian Surber

Everything was good, I was having a day-to-day conversation with my family. Then suddenly, BEEP! BEEP! An unexpected apocalyptic red alarm goes off. My family and I make eye contact and we know we're in trouble. Adrenaline fills us as we all try to run and hide, but BAM! a special ops swat crew barges in and swiftly assassinates each one of my family members by shooting them perfectly between their eyes. One of the men spots me, storms toward me, puts his gloved hand on my shoulder, and starts shaking me, "Dead is better than alive." When I woke up, I was terrified, in cold sweats, crying, but I was grateful. This wasn't a bad dream, it was an opportunity to show my family I love them, an opportunity to turn my fear of death into gratitude for life, and an opportunity I wish more people took advantage of.

According to the *National Science Foundation*, we experience anywhere from 9,000-40,000 negative thoughts a day. But studies in *Science Magazine* show most people would literally rather be given electric shocks than be left alone with their ideas. However, embracing negative thinking can actually lead to a better life by helping us acknowledge our challenges and work through them. By facing our nightmares head-on, we can learn from them, grow stronger, and use these challenges as opportunities for growth. So today, we'll analyze how society has fallen asleep to the importance of negative thinking, then look at some of the nightmarish consequences of suppressing these emotions, and finally learn some strategies so we can embrace negative thinking and live the life of our dreams.

We don't need advanced dream psychology to understand why we hate negative thinking. It's because it makes us uncomfortable. According to the *Mental Health Research Centre for Clinical Interventions*, "most people dislike feeling uncomfortable, and so when we experience emotional discomfort, we may evaluate it negatively...some of the common beliefs that we might have when we start to experience negative emotion are: I will lose control, it's weak to feel this way, and/or it is wrong to feel this way." But when you avoid your problems that leads to a weak mind, struggles with relationships, and lack of self-awareness. Lack of self-awareness makes you think you're a victim, that the world is out to get you. You think your actions don't have an impact, but they do. For example, my dad was so afraid of communicating his problems that he ended up leaving my family. And by leaving our family, all of his responsibilities were put on me: the physical labor of packing in wood, taking out the trash, and practically raising my little brothers. All of this made me more tired and overwhelmed so when my friends needed me, I wasn't able to be 100% there for them. I felt like if I didn't do my responsibilities, my life was falling apart which instilled the same cycle in me.

Fear of negative thinking harms our health by raising our anxiety, addiction to food or drugs, and our connections with people. First, let's talk about health: According to Dr.

Suzanne C. Segerstrom, a professor of psychology at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, suppressing our emotions can lead to shame and other ailments like mental health problems, eating disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Maybe a few years ago you wanted to lose weight and you've been avoiding it. When your friends invite you to the beach, you feel regret about not facing your problems so your mental health tanks. You might not go to the beach because you don't feel confident about your appearance. By not going to the beach, you are missing out on something you might really enjoy like surfing. You might miss out on finding your passion.

Fear of negative thinking can also lead to addiction and drugs. People will avoid negative thinking because it makes them feel bad, so they go to something that makes them feel good. But that's only short term and when the consequences of hiding these feelings with weed, meth, or fentanyl come, they hit like a rocket. And they hit even harder in small towns, where the overdose rate is 45% higher according to *American Addiction Centers*. Drugs are prevalent everywhere, but on my reservation, for us, it's in our homes. All my family members and everyone in this community have a story to relate to that. Negative thinking also keeps us from making connections with people by avoiding vulnerability. That means not communicating effectively and constantly feeling misunderstood, which creates low self-esteem.

Finally, fear of negative thinking makes us codependent. When our friends are afraid of negative thinking, and we come to them with problems, they downplay these problems to surface-level stuff. They avoid deep-level conversations because of the feelings they could bring up. It feels like they are not listening to you because they are not willing to go to that place. This leads to feelings of isolation, which increases mental illness because humans are a social species. In fact, according to the *American Medical Association*, "social isolation and loneliness each independently have more than a 25% increased risk for significant health issues like anxiety, depression... stroke, diabetes and dementia."

As the famous stoic philosopher Jerzy Gregorek once said, "Hard choices, easy life. Easy choices, hard life." So let's start making some hard choices and embrace negativity. One way we can embrace negative thinking is by focusing on the worst-case scenario. Worst-case scenarios increase open-mindedness by thinking of both negative possibilities and positive possibilities and connecting them. An example is: if I don't get my eating habits right and exercise more, I'm going to be really obese. I need to avoid this by eating healthier. This strategy, called "defensive pessimism," is "used by anxious people to help them manage their anxiety so they can work productively." Defensive pessimists lower their expectations to help prepare themselves for the worst. Then, they mentally play through all the bad things that might happen," according to *Wellesley College*.

Another is learning to pursue all experiences, including the bad ones, instead of pure pleasure. Buddhist psychologists can teach us a lot about this. According to the *National Library of Medicine*, Buddhists argue that the desire-driven pursuit of happiness can lead to such negative emotions as cruelty, violence, pride, and greed, which in turn cause happiness to fluctuate." However, bad experience teaches you. When you grow older, you look back on

your bad life experiences and sort of laugh. That's way better than looking back on your life and being filled with regret.

In fact, CNN tells the story of Edie Simms, a 102-year-old woman, who didn't feel like her life was complete unless she had that bad experience. She wanted to get arrested. According to CNN, "Simms couldn't be happier." She was so giggly. And she laughed her old lady giggles when she was sitting in a prison. Think of how infectious this joy can be. Imagine you're a guy in jail feeling all ashamed and you hear an old lady giggling. That could make you look for other things that could be funny. It definitely made me think about being more open-minded. After all, from behind prison bars, Simms said, "It's a great world if you just open your eyes and look at it."

Simms' bucket list also reminds us that, one day we are all going to die. So it's best to make your time worthwhile. And that doesn't always mean being positive. I love to contemplate death. It gives me a sense of detachment from the world, almost looking at the world from a bird's point of view instead of my own. It gives me a bigger picture and makes me see my problems are not so big and not so overwhelming. Death challenges us to look for the unknown. No one knows what happens after death. Reincarnation? Heaven or Hell? Another belief is, "I will be you and you will be me." These larger thoughts help us care about where we are, who we are, who we're with and what we're going to be. In fact, according to a doctoral study from *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, people who regularly imagined "walking through a graveyard proved 40 percent more likely to help a stranger." Another study from *UC Berkeley* showed that "visualizing their own death led people to become more grateful." Like nightmares, sharing death makes you realize how valuable life is

Consider this speech an alarm. BEEP! BEEP! Fear of negative thinking holds us back from facing our problems and learning from them. BEEP BEEP! Avoiding negative thinking can also lead to increased anxiety and stress BEEP! BEEP! It can also limit creativity and innovation, as we may shy away from exploring unconventional ideas or solutions. BEEP! BEEP! And it leads to a lack of self-awareness, as we may ignore important emotions and insights. However, rather than hiding from this red light like I did in my dream, let's use it as an opportunity to face these challenges head-on. Let's sweat. Let's cry. Let's be terrified. Trust me: it'll make us more grateful.

Research sources: *National Science Foundation, Science Magazine, Mental Health Research Centre for Clinical Interventions, American Addiction Centers, American Medical Association, Wellesley College, National Library of Medicine, CNN, Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, UC Berkeley*