



Can I train myself to be Happier?

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Michael Mosley featured in an episode of “Horizon” on BBC Two on Wednesday 10th July in which he, a self-confessed pessimist, attempted to train himself to be more optimistic. Mosley described how he always looks at the negatives of a situation, generally believes that the worst will happen and spends a lot of time worrying about the future- so much so that he believes it has contributed enormously to his long term battle with insomnia.

During the programme Mosley underwent attentional bias training or (Cognitive Bias Modification CBM) and mindfulness meditation. Following seven weeks of practicing both of these interventions simultaneously, both he and his loved ones reported a difference in his state of mind, reporting greater ability to deal with life’s ups and downs and coping with stress better. Laboratory tests also showed differences in attentional bias and brain activity that suggested a more “optimistic brain”.

So great news- some proof that we can train ourselves to be more positive and optimistic. So, if you don’t have a team of scientists to help you become more optimistic, what steps can you take in your daily life to help? There are two main lessons that we can take from this research: number one- pay attention to the positive, and number two- live in the present.

1. Look out for the positive

There’s a strange phenomenon that some of you may have experienced- when you are single all you see are couples, when you are expecting a child all you see are people with children, when you are training for a race all you see are runners etc. What does this tell us? It isn’t that there are more happy couples, more babies, or more runners in the world at these times, it’s that our attention is drawn to the things that we are thinking about. Negative thinking leads to our attention being drawn to negative things and the more negative things we see, the more negative we feel- it’s vicious cycle. If you are on the lookout for the negative outcome all of the time, you are more likely to behave in a way that actually causes those negative outcomes. Furthermore, you’re so busy looking out for the negative that you miss the opportunities for positive outcomes.

- a. Make a conscious effort to list 3 positive things that happened in your day before you go to bed. They can be as big or as small as you like, as long as they are positive.
- b. Hang out with positive people- these people give you energy and make you feel good, you will be able to identify them quite easily from the people who drain your energy. Spend more time with the energisers and less time (if any time) with the energy zappers.
- c. Do more fun stuff! Research has shown that we need three positive experiences to equal out one negative experience to keep us feeling positive. Make time for activities that you enjoy throughout the day and throughout the working week to keep yourself topped up with positivity.

2. Live in the present

Whilst it’s important to learn from the past and plan for the future, the only time that we are ever really ‘in’ is **the present**- the here and now. It’s the only thing that we have control over at this moment, be sure to live in the present.

- a. When you’re in the shower- be in the shower! Don’t be thinking about the meeting that you have to chair at 9am, or the long list of jobs that you have to get done

before picking the children up at 3pm. Feel the water on your skin, enjoy the sensation, smell the shower gel, and listen to the noise of the water falling.

- b. Learn from children- the next time you are in the presence of a young child notice how fascinated they are with every little detail around them. Look how happy they are. They are living one hundred percent in the moment, they are not thinking about what they are going to do after they have finished splashing in the paddling pool, they are just enjoying splashing in the paddling pool.
- c. Mindfulness practice or meditation is a set of techniques that aims to help people to live in the present moment. Mindfulness practice has been shown to be useful for both adults and children in trying to control unhelpful emotions. If you're interested to learn more take a look at this excellent demonstration of mindfulness practice by [Jon-Kabat Zinn](#) at an event held by [Action for Happiness](#). HINT- Don't try and do something else whilst watching the video- I know it's what we usually do, but that is not very mindful now is it?!