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Family Focus

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Many families have established the practice of expressing gratitude at the dinner table and at other times. It is so helpful for children to acquire this positive habit at an early age. The hope is that, throughout their lives, they'll have a way to lift themselves up when they may tend to spiral down.

Will, a 30-year-old single sales manager, has been in therapy to work on changing his pessimistic, glass-half-empty orientation that has caused him to be chronically unhappy. And, of course, Will doesn't attract friends or romantic partners very easily, since it's difficult to be around someone who is perpetually negative and cynical. The lack of social companionship feeds into Will's pessimism, and he has been trapped in a cycle of hopelessness. He is already on an anti-depressant that has helped him, and he doesn't want to increase his dosage.

Throughout this pandemic, Will has lived alone and worked from home with little contact with others. He was concerned about being unhappy before the pandemic, even when he was able to be around people at work, go to the gym, and go out and socialize. But now he feels acute loneliness and disconnection from others.

Will is a product of an upbringing where he was encouraged to succeed in academics and sports. Growing up, he was happier and more self-confident. All good, except that he didn't develop himself beyond his accomplishments. He didn't need to think much about his personal qualities and strengths. Now that he is just one of many high-performing employees, Will can't rely on his former means of achieving contentment.

During this pandemic and so many other challenges, we have all had to call upon our inner strength while we experience more worry, limitations, and longing for our former lives. We are likely spending more time with ourselves than before, especially those who live alone. It's important to look for ways to be able to boost our own spirits.

In order to turn around negative thinking, which had become habitual in Will's case, it helps to track these thoughts. I asked Will to journal each negative thought about himself that he could. Awareness is key to taking control. Then over time, I asked Will to write a counter to each of these thoughts as he went along. He didn't have to come up with praise for himself, although if genuine, this would have been great. But the idea was to find evidence to reduce the level of negativity. This process of actively documenting self-criticisms can help disrupt automatic thought patterns. And while making these shifts won't automatically lead to happiness, it will at least set the stage for allowing in some positivity.

For example, when Will told himself that he would never find a girlfriend, he put down that he did have a successful (until the end) long-term relationship in the past - so he must have done something right. When Will told himself that he wasn't as smart as many of his team members, he countered with the fact that he

"Happiness depends on your mindset and attitude."~ Roy T. Bennett, "The Light in the Heart"

Here's to a happier new year in 2021! Trying to find happiness in the midst of turmoil, loss, and worry has tested our coping skills to the limit in 2020. For many, it has been difficult to think very positively and sustain this attitude at times during the past year. But each small step we take can contribute to lifting our spirits, so this column offers a few suggestions toward that end.

First, though, a caveat: If you or anyone in your family suffers from clinical depression or extreme anxiety, you will probably have difficulty controlling sad and negative thoughts. You won't be in a position to think more positively until you have been on a medication regimen and in cognitive behavioral therapy, the recommended treatments for these conditions. It would be detrimental for anyone to expect you to think a certain way until you are physiologically and psychologically ready.

But for those who don't have underlying conditions that interfere, increasing positive thinking is an important step in achieving more happiness and enjoyment in life. We all know people who have naturally optimistic, upbeat natures. But most of us have to strive to achieve this state of mind.

had received a promotion twice in the past four years.

Another helpful exercise is to think of what you would tell a good friend who was relating his or her own self-critical assessments. Would you agree that, yes, your friend should feel bad about himself or herself? Or would you help your friend look for evidence to the contrary? Typically, we can do this easily and naturally for a friend, so why not for ourselves? Is this even fair to have one standard for our friend and another, more exacting one for ourselves?

A cognitive tool that is very helpful in keeping us present (mindful), less anxious, more at peace and therefore happier, is avoiding anticipatory worry. For example, Will made himself very unhappy by projecting into the future how lonely and unfulfilling his life would be, based on his current status. Of course, in reality he has no way of knowing how his future will look. His worrying only serves to give him a sense of hopelessness, which discourages building his resolve to take positive action. Going forward, we can try to avoid getting caught up in negative "what-ifs" for the future and concentrate instead on making our present better.

We've all been blindsided by circumstances beyond our control this past year. Of course, there are times when we are going to be sad and disheartened or worried or scared, no matter what. We can't always try to think more positively. But it's important that we support ourselves and our loved ones as best we can during these unusual times, and consciously trying to adjust our perspective can help.

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[back](#)

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