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EMPLOYEE
NEWSLETTER

IMPACT

January-March 2018

How to Feel More Positive about Your Work



Imagination is a powerful tool that can bring us more happiness on the job.

The workplace is ripe for worrying. Faced with a combination of deadlines, meetings, and performance evaluations, many of us find ourselves distracted by unpleasant visions of the future.

Maybe we imagine that we'll be criticized for not completing a project to our boss's standards. Or maybe we worry that we'll be laid off. In the process, we end up generating negative emotions from experiences that haven't even happened yet. We create stress out of thin air.

Understanding how imagination works in the brain, and how it can influence our feelings, can point to a different way forward. With a little help, we can leverage our active imagination to experience good feelings about work.

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Be Happier

The Claremont Positivity Center is an online resource that incorporates Positive Psychology and mindfulness self-help techniques to improve employee well-being in the workplace and beyond.

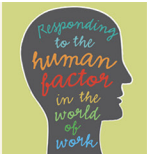
[Visit the Positivity Center](#)



Positivity Center

Claremont EAP distributes this newsletter to provide employees with general behavioral health information. If you have concerns about these or other behavioral health issues, you can call Claremont to arrange for assistance. You will be directed to an appropriate, experienced professional who can offer guidance in a variety of work and family matters.

For confidential help, call:
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Imagination and emotions

Did you know that your brain has a difficult time differentiating between things that happen in your imagination and things that happen in real life?

It turns out that when we imagine things, the brain attempts to simulate the responses that would occur if these situations actually happened. This is the same neural process that enables us to be empathic, put ourselves in someone else's shoes, and understand their mental states. But we also use this process to better understand ourselves.

In our minds, we can play out future scenarios to predict how we would personally think, feel, and respond to them. And by doing so, we experience thoughts and emotions similar to those that would occur if the situations were actually happening to us right now.

Luckily, you can turn this process around to undo stress—by imagining all the positive things that may happen in your future. In one study, participants used this technique for 14 days in a row, imagining four positive things that could actually happen to them the day after, such as eating a tasty meal or getting hired for a job. At the end of the study, this group showed an increase in happiness, while groups who imagined negative or routine future events did not.

When you imagine your boss finally praising you for something you did well or you visualize getting that promotion that you've been hoping for, you are essentially telling your brain to respond as if those things were happening. Suddenly, you create positive emotions out of thin air.

Three ways to use imagination at work

Now that you know how it works, you can practice using imagination to boost your mood and improve your workday. Here are three specific ways to apply this technique that could help you generate positive emotions at work.

1. START YOUR DAY BY IMAGINING THE BEST POSSIBLE DAY.

In the morning while you're brushing your teeth or taking a shower, spend a few minutes imagining the best possible day you could have. What would happen? Who would you interact with? How would you feel?

For example, I might imagine that my morning is really productive and I complete this article in record time—I'd feel a sense of accomplishment. Then, I imagine my meeting with a potential new client and we hit it off immediately—I feel joyous and delighted. The day ends with me tying up some loose ends so that I can fully disconnect from work—I then enjoy my evening. As you are imagining, really try to generate the emotions that would occur inside you if your day went exactly as you desire.

2. PAUSE FOR AN IMAGINATION BREAK BEFORE NEW SITUATIONS.

Before a meeting with your boss or a presentation to your coworkers, take a moment to visualize what would happen if everything went awesomely. Would you have an inspiring conversation? Would everyone love your ideas? Clarify for yourself exactly how it would go and imagine how it would feel.

Again, conjure those emotions and let yourself feel them. At the very least, you'll enter the situation in a good mood.

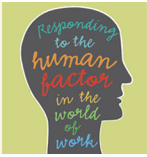
3. END YOUR DAY BY THINKING OF A BETTER TOMORROW.

Before you go to bed, imagine what tomorrow could be like—not what you think it will be like, but what it could be at its best. Don't limit yourself to thinking of things that could actually happen. Get creative by imagining that tomorrow you can fly or your workplace is suddenly overrun with adorable puppies.

Don't worry about feeling silly. Just go with it. Besides putting a smile on your face, this exercise could also help you practice your imagination skills, so it gets easier to dream about the future in general.

Of course, imagining something won't necessarily make it true. If your boss is never happy with your work, for example, that's obviously a real problem in need of a real solution. Also, you may not always be in the mood for positive imagination. In those moments, practicing mindfulness or identifying personal strengths that you could leverage at work are good alternatives.

Imagination is one of the human mind's exceptional capacities. With some practice, it can become a simple way to bring more positivity to your work life—another tool to add to your happiness toolkit.



Creating Your First Budget

Budgeting is one of the first great lessons of personal finance, yet relatively few people are taught the basics of creating one. Or if they're taught, they forget. The inability to measure how much money is coming in and how much is going out is a primary reason for financial illiteracy in this country.

So it's a good idea to go over those basics. The Webster's definition for budget is simple: "A plan for the coordination of resources and expenditures." A budget is both a noun and a verb – a plan and a process. So it makes sense to go over the basic process of budgeting – learning exactly what money is coming into your life, what's going out and how effectively you're using the difference.

The Income Column: Measuring what's coming in

For most people, this is the easy part. Income is largely made up of the following categories – wages, bonuses, investment income, alimony or other part-time income.

Budgeting is easiest if done on a monthly basis. It's an easy time period with which to measure the inflow and outflow of money and it allows you to see over the course of a year which months tend to be better for income or spending.

How should you record these amounts? Save all pay stubs and other proof of income. Photocopy checks before you deposit them and either build a physical file or start keeping track of income using computer software or online resources like Mint.com.

The Expense Column: Measuring what's going out

Why are expenses tougher? Because tracking every cent you spend can be tough when you've never done it before. This process forces you to save receipts, credit card statements or to physically write down cash amounts in the absence of receipts. Recording and analyzing expenses are generally the most work-intensive part of budgeting, but there's a silver lining – less spending means less recording time!

What are the primary expense categories? Food, shelter and clothing.

What's beyond that? All of your monthly bills. Retirement investments. College savings for your kids. Insurance costs. And everyone's favorite, taxes.

And beyond that? Entertainment expenses – movies, plays, vacations, sports, and of course one of the biggest money drains most people can't stand to give up, cable TV.

How should you record these amounts? The same way you did in the income column.

The Upshot

If your expenses match your income, congratulations. Relatively few people can say that, though the recent economic downturn has forced more people to cut debt and boost savings.

But if your expenses are still outrunning your income, you now know you have to start trimming and finding more money for savings, investment or debt reduction.

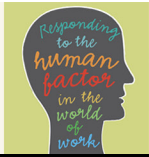
What should your target be? There are a variety of theories, but you will often hear the term "60 percent solution." This means aiming for a total spending figure equal to the first 60 percent of your income.

How do you get there? Start by identifying the expenses you can live without – designer coffee, restaurant meals and carryout might be a start. Then start finding ways to whittle down monthly bills – paying more than the minimums on credit card bills, consolidating other debt with lower-rate offers if you can find them. If you can refinance your mortgage affordably, that's another good way to attack the spending side of your budget.

And what do you do with that extra money? First, make sure you have an emergency fund that contains 3-6 months of money to cover living expenses. Then start putting money away for retirement. After that, money for the kids' college fund. Beyond that, extras like vacations, entertainment and other treats.

If this approach seems a bit Spartan, it's a good starting point – indeed, every individual defines the term "financial essentials" a bit differently. But it's important to start prioritizing financial issues correctly. For help, it makes sense to consult a professional like a qualified financial planner and a tax expert to identify ways to save and tip more money into a solid financial future.

Financial Planning Association (FPA) ©2017



Pushing Past Your Plateau

We promise ourselves we'll change our lifestyles for better health. We start diets, launch exercise programs or try to quit smoking. And then we stall. We hit a plateau, putting us at risk of losing precious gains or quitting altogether.



A healthy lifestyle change is just that -- change. "A lot of people believe that change is easy, but we are fundamentally conservative creatures, and we don't change until we have to," says Michael J. Mahoney, Ph.D., an American Psychological Association spokesman and professor at the University of North Texas. "It doesn't take much to throw us off course because we are such creatures of routine."

So sticking with a new routine is tough. Dr. Mahoney suggests you focus on being consistent, especially in the first six weeks of a change. That way, you build new patterns of behavior. Once that happens, odds are you'll "begin to speak to yourself about the change in a more positive tone, instead of a negative one."

MAKE A PLEDGE

Pledging to reward yourself if you meet your goals can be a great tool for getting past plateaus. The reward that awaits you can serve as a symbol of what you're trying to do and give you something to look forward to. "The symbol could be anything," notes Dr. Mahoney. It could be a piece of jewelry or a new golf club, for instance. Once you earn it, you can set your sights on a new reward for the next step.

When you're trying to get past a plateau, he recommends you focus each day on your behavior, your effort, rather than on your goal -- the amount of weight you'd like to lose, for instance.

One crucial skill you'll need is patience. This, more than anything, will help get you past plateaus.

"Most people don't see a traffic jam as an opportunity to practice patience," Dr. Mahoney says. But the skills that help you put up with a stalled interstate "will help you realize and understand that plateaus are a natural part of life and they're going to occur, so if you learn patience you'll get over plateaus."

"Progress," he notes, "is not always linear. If we understand this going in, it helps us be more patient with the plateaus, so that we can get past them and keep going."

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SIX STEPS TO PROGRESS

Are you stuck on a plateau? Here are six tips for pushing onward from Michael Mercer, Ph.D., co-author of the book *Spontaneous Optimism: Proven Strategies for Health, Prosperity and Happiness* :

1. DEFINE YOUR AIM CLEARLY. "It's impossible to hit your target if you don't know exactly what you're aiming at," says Dr. Mercer, who gives about 50 speeches a year to executives and other audiences.

2. DON'T LET LAZINESS CREEP IN. "Sure, it's easier not to do something," he says. Instead, stay focused on your path. If you promised yourself you'd exercise at 6 a.m., don't hit the snooze button when the alarm goes off. Remind yourself firmly about your goals and get moving.

3. WHEN YOU DON'T WANT TO EXERCISE OR YOU WANT TO QUIT YOUR DIET, TAKE THREE SECONDS TO PICTURE HOW YOU WANT TO LOOK OR FEEL AT THE END OF YOUR PROGRAM. A lot of people begin such programs because they want to look attractive to others, while others are interested in improving their health.

4. USE A TIME-LIMIT APPROACH TO YOUR PROGRAM. "Give yourself, say, 12 weeks to accomplish a goal within your program," he says. When you reach that goal, set a new one and give yourself another 12 weeks. "This enables you to track your progress and helps you to define your target. Use the scale, measuring tape or other device to measure your progress in the time period and to help you set new goals. The best cure for putting things off is a deadline."

5. GIVE YOURSELF REWARDS FOR REACHING YOUR DAILY, WEEKLY AND MONTHLY GOALS. "For instance, tell yourself you'll go to a movie you've been wanting to see if you get your exercise in that day," he says.

6. THINK ABOUT COMMITTING TO A SELF-PUNISHMENT IF YOU FAIL. "I worked with a group that had to write a check to charity and put it in my hands. If they didn't reach the goal, which was well within their limits, I was to mail the check by a particular date," Dr. Mercer says. "Every one of them reached the goal."

For confidential help, call: **800-834-3773**
or visit claremonteap.com