

*Lisa Firestone discusses the risks of indulging in negative attitudes and the rewards of being positive.*

- 1 Whether it is a lazy co-worker who calls in sick every Monday or a flaky friend who always cancels at the last minute, there is always something (or someone) in our lives that can make us negative. Like indulging in junk food, giving in to negativity is easy, yet this indulgence is difficult to shake off. But what are the risks of slipping into negative attitudes? A 2009 study of more than 97,000 women showed that optimistic women had lower rates of coronary heart disease, cancer-related deaths, and mortality. Conversely, women with the most pessimistic personalities, had higher rates of these diseases and death. When we think of hostility and cynicism as life-threatening conditions, it makes the goal of being less negative all the more crucial. 5
- 2 Negativity is part of a defensive posture we take to protect ourselves. It is typically triggered when we feel hurt by or angry at something, and instead of dealing with those emotions directly, we allow them to fester and skew our outlook. When we grow negative toward one thing in our lives, we may slowly start to turn on everything. During a visit with her family over the holidays, a friend of mine found herself getting increasingly frustrated with her husband. What started as small irritations at him forgetting their camera and not being ready on time soon grew into a hostile attitude toward almost everything he did. This critical and defensive point of view shaped her vacation and left her grouchy and irritable toward her family and friends. It was not until she got home that she asked herself, "What was my problem? How did I let that feeling of negativity take over?" 10 15
- 3 In being negative, we are often indulging in self-righteous attitudes and forming expectations that people should behave a certain way. For example, the same friend had thoughts like, "I never would have made *him* wait; he is so inconsiderate," or "I guess he really doesn't care if we get pictures of us with his family. I care more than he does about us all being together." Through this shadowy perspective, we start to seek out and focus on the worst in people. My friend's anxiety about the visit combined with her style of coping with that uncomfortable feeling by "being organised" and "taking control of the situation" made her more reactive to anything that did not go as she had planned. She was on edge, watching for mistakes, rather than focusing on the experience of sharing something with her husband. My friend's story reminded me that negativity often surfaces when we direct negative emotions or perceptions we have toward ourselves outward onto those around us. Her critical feelings toward her husband rose from a pressure she was putting on herself to "be her best" in front of their families. She wanted everything to go perfectly, from their arrival to the pictures they would come home with. 20 25 30
- 4 Many of our negative emotions arise when we are feeling vulnerable. In moments when we are feeling open and are let down, we are far more likely to react by toughening up and becoming defensive. A heightened susceptibility to negativity can be a sure sign that we have turned on ourselves. When we enter this state of mind, we are often viewing those around us through the same critical filter through which we see ourselves. This critical inner voice is frequently directed at us, telling us we are not good enough or that we are not going to fit in. Yet, the harsh judgment of this inner critic can easily be projected outward onto the people around us. We may start seeing only the flaws in everyone, from our closest friend to a distant relative, and fail to have compassion for their struggles and distractions. 35 40
- 5 Because negative and suspicious attitudes create a filter through which we observe our surroundings, when we are in this state, we tend to miss out on life's joys. We indulge in an "us versus them" mentality that pits us against a certain person or group. It is easy to distort people and create a caricature of their flaws. When we do this, it is valuable to ask ourselves, "Whose point of view is coming through? Is this how I really feel, or am I overreacting based on old feelings from my past?" Very often, our negative attitudes mirror experiences from our past. The critical attitudes we are exposed to early in life, whether directed at us or at others, can shape the way we see people when we grow up. Events that leave us feeling vulnerable, hurt 45 50

or angry will often trigger these old and often, negative, reactions. As adults, it is our responsibility to separate these attitudes from our own and to differentiate them from destructive early influences, so that we do not hurt those closest to us.

- 6 This negativity can be contagious, bringing down those around us. It will lead us to alienate others, act in a hostile manner, or become defensive and isolated. Ultimately, it is always in our own interest to be open and vulnerable rather than to be nasty or write people off. The only persons we can control are ourselves. When we get negative, we are the ones who suffer. Being a “glass-half-full” kind of person not only makes us happier, but healthier. Research published in the *Journal of Personality* posits that “positive emotions contribute to psychological and physical well-being via more effective coping.” In other words, our positive feelings actually make us more resilient when facing negative circumstances. So the question becomes, “why *not* look for the best in people?” Why make ourselves suffer over the flaws of others? How can we shake off negative, destructive points of view and the critical attitudes that lead us on a downward spiral? 55 60
- 7 Avoiding negativity does not mean avoiding emotions. It is not about being phony or living in a fantasy. Rather, it is about alleviating our own suffering by dealing with emotions directly without letting them colour the lens through which we view the world. It is important to acknowledge our emotions and to allow ourselves to feel them fully. We can then decide how we want to act. Instead of letting out critical comments under our breath or gossiping about someone we feel provoked by, we can think about what is triggering our negative reactions – have we, perhaps, slipped into a point of view that is not our own? We can at least acknowledge what we are feeling to ourselves and thus maintain our integrity by taking actions that will not lead us to sabotage our own experience or bubble over with negativity. 65 70
- 8 Cultivating a compassionate attitude in which we are curious, open, accepting, and loving towards ourselves is essential to fighting negativity. When we are able to feel safe and secure in ourselves, we are better able to extend compassion towards others. We can start by recognising that everyone struggles. Often, when a person does something that hurts us, they are acting defensively since they themselves are hurting. Compassion requires a unique combination of accepting that we all have sovereign minds that think differently, while also realising that we are all in the same boat, that we have all been hurt in our own ways. Compassion counters negativity by allowing us to feel our anger, pain, or frustration without taking these feelings to a dark place that bends both us and those close to us out of shape. 75 80
- 9 It is important to accept that we create the world we live in. When we cultivate compassion instead of turning negative, we feel better. We feel closer to the people we care about and more fulfilled within ourselves. My friend’s biggest regret over her holiday was having acted cold and dismissive towards her husband instead of seeing that he too was hurting. Visiting his family always brought up painful memories of being called “stupid” and “forgetful.” She could have expressed her concern without turning against him, and they both could have benefited by talking through their underlying emotions. By being open and understanding, we relieve ourselves of our own negative attitudes, and we draw out the best in those around us. 85 90

Adapted from “Is Cynicism Ruining Your Life?” by Dr. Lisa Firestone