

Get That Pickle Out of Your Mouth! 9 Steps to a More Positive Attitude

THE NEXT TIME YOU'RE STANDING IN LINE at the airport, eating in the company cafeteria, or walking through a shopping mall, listen carefully to the conversations going on around you. It won't be long before you hear somebody complaining about something. Listen long enough and it will dawn on you that you're hearing a lot of complaining. If you then turn your attention inward and pay attention to what you yourself are saying and thinking, you will be astonished – no, you will be appalled – at how much of your mental energy is being wasted on complaining.

We have become a nation of pickle-suckers. Complaining and its conversational companions commiserating (Oh, you poor baby!) and one-upping (You think you've got it bad? Listen to what I have to put up with!) have become conversational mainstays. Once, while conducting a seminar, I challenged a group to monitor their own complaining for a 30-day period (the Pickle Challenge™). One participant remarked that if it weren't for complaining, she would never talk to her mother!

Is it possible for someone to be a negative, bitter, cynical, sarcastic pickle sucker in the break room and fifteen minutes later become a genuinely courteous customer service or genuinely compassionate caregiver? Not likely. And do customers and patients see right through the act? You bet. Is it possible for someone to be a pickle sucker at work, then go home and be a nurturing and empowering parent? Or is that person more likely to be raising a Junior Dilbert, a kid who will enter the workplace preconditioned with negative attitudes that will eventually prove to be self-sabotaging? This negativity takes a terrible toll on organizations in terms of morale and productivity, but we become so used to it that we're not even aware of it. An analogy I often use is smoking on airplanes. It used to be that as soon as the seatbelt light went off, all the smokers would light up. The rest of us just put up with it, thinking that there was nothing we could do, so we simply endured getting off the plane feeling sick and smelling like we'd slept in an ashtray. Well, what would happen to someone who lit a cigarette on an airplane today? (Answer: they'd be shown the door.)

The same principle applies to emotional toxicity in the workplace environment. If I could somehow wave a magic wand and eliminate all criticizing and complaining from your workplace for the next 30 days, the first person who started in again would be treated in about the same way as the smoker on an airplane. People would get so used to working in a positive

and supportive place, they simply would not tolerate somebody contaminating it with bitching, moaning, and whining (the BMW club). As pernicious as all this emotional negativity is to the organization, the real tragedy is the corrosive effect it has on the human soul. Every time you complain – about anything – you are proclaiming to the world, and to yourself, that you are a victim. Why? Because to complain (as opposed to objectively identifying a problem and offering a solution) is to simultaneously state that: 1) something is bothering you (otherwise you wouldn't be complaining; 2) it's someone else's fault (otherwise you'd be looking in the mirror instead of pointing a finger); and 3) you are powerless to do anything about it (otherwise you'd be doing something instead of just complaining). Gradually, without even being aware it's happening, pickle-suckers slip into the victim mindset. And their dreams slowly die.

Here are seven practical yet powerful actions you can take to get that pickle out of your mouth and cultivate a more positive attitude. While a positive attitude alone won't guarantee your success, the absence of one will almost certainly contribute to your failure.

Step #1: Don't be a victim of your past.

In his book *The Soul's Code*, Jungian psychologist James Hillman wrote that a Freudian fixation with the hurts of the past (why do you think mother loved your brother best, Tommy?) tends to turn people into self-perceived victims. As every historian knows, the past is substantially what you choose to remember. If you want to have a brighter future, the first step might be to remember a brighter past by being a lot more selective about the things you choose to recall. If you don't have a nurturing past, make one up. Hillman wrote that many of the world's great geniuses "remember" a past that never actually happened, but which supports their desired self-image (e.g. the musical prodigy who "remembers" getting up in the middle of the night to practice, but whose parents swear she slept the sleep of the dead). If geniuses can boost their happiness and success this way, why not ordinary people like you and me?

In thinking about the past, it's important to remember that the truth is more important than the facts. I once had a teacher tell me, in front of the class, that I would never amount to a hill of beans. The fact is, that was a humiliating statement that was not healthy to my self-esteem. The truth is that this teacher was frustrated by my misbehavior, knew that if I didn't change my ways I'd cause myself endless problems in the future, and was genuinely trying to motivate me in the only way that at the time seemed possible. Which history do I remember? The choice is mine, but remembering the truth is empowering, remembering the past is victimizing.

Step #2: Give your complaints the Valley Forge test.

Whenever you find yourself complaining about something, imagine being transported back through time to Valley Forge during that horrible winter of 1776-77. Visualize yourself describing this complaint of yours to the freezing, starving patriots who sacrificed so much to win the freedoms that you now enjoy. If your suffering makes them cry out in sympathy, then, by Jove, you do have a legitimate gripe, so by all means keep whining about it if you must. If, on the other hand, your mind's ear hears them laughing at your "problem," then either drop it or deal with it, but for heaven's sake stop whining about it.

Step #3: Focus your dissatisfaction.

Dissatisfaction can be an incredible source of energy and motivation, if you don't dissipate it with promiscuous complaining. If you are sitting on a thumbtack, you will be incredibly focused on that one problem, and powerfully motivated to move! If you can focus your dissatisfaction on one thing that really matters, and not promiscuously spread it around on every little thing that irks you, you will have created for yourself a great source of motivation.

Say, for example, the one and only thing you allow yourself to be unhappy about is your crummy home (like Jeff Foxworthy's redneck, your house has wheels and your car doesn't). If you refuse to complain about anything else, that focused dissatisfaction will grow into a raging inferno of ambition. You'll start waking up in the middle of the night with ideas for how to make the dream home become your real home, and getting up in the morning with the inspiration to take action on those ideas.

Step #4: Get rid of your emotional baggage.

We all carry around emotional baggage from the past – ancient grudges we can't seem to let go, hurt feelings that never healed, insults that have festered and metastasized. As Charlotte Joko Beck noted in her book *Everyday Zen*, deny it though we may, we actually love hanging on to these little dramas. Complaining about them comforts us in our failures (well, of course I couldn't climb that mountain, what with all this baggage I have to haul around). The more emotional baggage we carry around, the more we have to complain about – and the more excuses we have for living a life that is less than what we would desire for ourselves.

When I take people on wilderness retreats, I have each hiker place an ugly rock in their backpack (though I once had a geologist tell me there's no such thing as an ugly rock). This rock is to represent some emotional baggage

they'd like to be rid of. Trust me, by the seventh day of carrying a heavy pack, the unnecessary weight of that rock is a real burden! On the last day, we have a ceremony: we build a cairn – a small pile of rocks that marks a trail. Each hiker adds his or her rock and says goodbye to it. I've seen miraculous things happen as people turn and walk away, leaving their rock, and the emotional baggage it represents, behind in the desert.

Step #5: Challenge your negative self-talk.

Listen to the way you talk to yourself. If you're like most people, you put up with abuse from your inner critic that you would never tolerate from even your boss or your spouse. One way to erase negative self-talk is with a technique I call Metaphorical Visualizationtm. Visualize your inner critic as a vandal with a can of spray paint who runs around painting the graffiti of negative self-talk on the walls of your mind. Then imagine The Janitor in Your Attictm (my janitor is named Spike) painting over that abusive mental graffiti (How could you be so stupid!) and replacing it with positive and nurturing affirmations (I am capable of achieving my dreams and I deserve to enjoy the fruits of my success). Be creative. Instead of a Janitor, imagine a crew of elves up there in your attic. All you need to make this work is frequent repetition and the belief that it will indeed work. Make it fun and it won't even feel like work!

Step #6: Use Direction Deflection Questions.

Complaining is often the first step on a slippery slope of negativity that hits bottom with you saying or doing things you later regret. Whenever you catch yourself about to complain, immediately stop and ask yourself this question: "Is what I'm about to say consistent with my best self?" If the answer is No, the next question is, "What would I say if I were being my best self?" If you listen to your intuition, you will hear the answer; if you act upon that answer, you'll spend more time in "best self" mode. Pretty soon, you'll also find that you'll be doing a lot less complaining because you'll have a lot less to complain about.

Step #7: Internalize The Serenity Prayer.

You've no doubt heard this prayer: grant me the courage to change what I can, the serenity to accept what I cannot, and the wisdom to know the difference. Internalizing The Serenity Prayer can help you have the courage to confront your problems with constructive action, the serenity to accept your predicaments with equanimity, and the wisdom to not complain about either, knowing that you're doing all you can do and the rest is in God's hands.

Step #8: Take The Self Empowerment Pledge.

Are you willing to spend one minute per day for a year to dramatically

change your life for the better? That's 365 minutes – the amount of time the average American spends watching television every two or three days. The Self Empowerment Pledge contains seven simple promises – promises that you make to yourself. Every day for a year, make that day's promise four times – once each in the morning, at noon, in the afternoon, and before bed. That's one minute per day. At first, you'll hear your inner critic laughing at you (You're going to take responsibility for yourself and stop blaming other people? Yeah, right, when pigs fly!). Over time, however, just hearing yourself make these promises will have a profound impact on your beliefs, your attitudes, and your behaviors. And as those transformations occur, the quality of your outcomes will improve in stride.

If you'd like to make The Self Empowerment Pledge a part of your life, you will find additional resources at the website www.pledgepower.com

Step #9: See one, do one, teach one.

This is a statement surgery residents hear all the time, because it conveys: 1) there is too much to learn to be dawdling around; and 2) to really learn something you must do it, but to be an expert you must teach it. The same principle can be applied to developing a more positive attitude. In this article, I've shared with you nine proven strategies (you have "seen one"). Now your challenge will be to take one or more of these strategies and apply them in your work and your life (now your challenge is to "do one"). Assuming that they work (and they will work), the best way for you to help yourself is to help someone else by sharing with them (the next stage is for you to "teach one"). This can be your children or your coworkers, or both. Anytime you "teach one," remind yourself that you need to be sitting front and center in your "classroom" re-listening to the lesson.

Get that pickle out of your mouth and smile.

Remember the woman who said that if it weren't for complaining, she'd never speak with her mother? Well, several months later she told our group that for the first time in her adult life, she and her mother were actually talking about things that really matter, not just exchanging gripes. Are you unhappy with your life? Trapped in a dead-end job, weighed down by debt, struggling with difficult relationships? Get that pickle out of your mouth! You can't smile when you're sucking on a pickle. Smiling in the face of difficulty instead of whining about it is often the first step to turning your life around.

In their book *The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force*, Jeffrey M. Schwartz, M.D. and Sharon Begley describe research evidence which shows that directed mental effort can actually bring

about physical changes in the brain. "We are seeing," they say, "the brain's potential to correct its own flaws and enhance its own capabilities." When you consciously override the negative self-talk of your inner critic and replace it with nurturing affirmations; when you replace worthless complaining with constructive problem-solving; and when you deliberately focus your attention on what really matters instead of letting it wander to whatever annoyance happens to grab your attention, you replace the toxic pickle juice of victimhood with the sweet nectar of self-empowerment. In the process, you breathe new life into your dreams.

The Self Empowerment Pledge: Seven Simple Promises that Will Change Your Life is included on the following page.

THE SELF EMPOWERMENT PLEDGE

Seven Simple Promises That Will Change Your Life

Monday's Promise: Responsibility

I will take complete responsibility for my health, my happiness, my success, and my life, and will not blame others for my problems or predicaments.

Tuesday's Promise: Accountability

I will not allow low self-esteem, self-limiting beliefs, or the negativity of others to prevent me from achieving my authentic goals and from becoming the person I am meant to be.

Wednesday's Promise: Determination

I will do the things I'm afraid to do, but which I know should be done. Sometimes this will mean asking for help to do that which I cannot do by myself.

Thursday's Promise: Contribution

I will earn the help I need in advance by helping other people now, and repay the help I receive by serving others later.

Friday's Promise: Resilience

I will face rejection and failure with courage, awareness, and perseverance, making these experiences the platform for future acceptance and success.

Saturday's Promise: Perspective

I will have faith that, though I might not understand why adversity happens, by my conscious choice I can find strength, compassion, and grace through my trials.

Sunday's Promise: Faith

My faith and my gratitude for all that I have been blessed with will shine through in my attitudes and in my actions.