

## **PART 1**

# **Positive Thinking and Positive Action**

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# 1

## You Are What You Think



## **Positive thinking vs. negative thinking**

Positive thinking will let you do everything better than negative thinking will. Think positively and you're likely to enjoy positive results. Negative thinking, on the other hand, can lead to outcomes you'd rather not have. Negative thinking undermines your confidence. It contributes to indecision. It defeats you. It beats you. It creates the 'bad luck' that you'll later lament.

Think positively and you'll feel able to manage and do well. Think negatively and you're likely to feel overwhelmed and powerless. What you think and say to yourself can have quite an impact on what you can and can't do, as shown by this simple exercise. Try it for yourself. You'll need another person to help.

### **Part 1:**

- Ask the other person to stand and extend their dominant arm out horizontally, at shoulder level so that their arm is parallel with the floor.

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- Ask them to think of a time when they failed at something – a test or exam or job interview, for example. Then ask them to think negative thoughts about themselves: ‘I’m weak. I’m not as clever as other people. I’m hopeless. I’m pathetic, I’m not good at anything. I can’t do this.’
- Ask the person to continue thinking the negative things. Tell them you are going to stand behind them and attempt to pull their dominant arm down to their side. Ask them to resist you pulling their arm down.

#### **Part 2:**

- Now, ask the person to hold their dominant arm up again at the shoulders, parallel to the floor.
- This time, ask them to think of a time when they achieved something, succeeded and did well at something – passed a test or exam, got offered the job, did well in a sport, for example. Then ask them to think of positive things about themselves: ‘I try my best. I can do well. I feel good about myself. I am a good person. I am strong. I can do this.’
- Ask them to repeat the positive statements to themselves while you attempt to pull their arm down to their side. Ask them to resist the pull.

Typically, in the first part of the exercise, the person’s arm is more likely to give way to your pull. Negativity overwhelms them and it’s not easy for them to be strong. However, when the person’s thoughts are positive, their body has the ability to resist the force that’s pulling their

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arm down. They are more likely to stay strong and resist your pull.

So what does this little experiment prove? It shows us the power of our thoughts over our bodies. When we think negative thoughts, we tend to zap our strength. When we have positive thoughts, we become stronger and are more in control.

You are what you think. And what you think, you are.

It's important to know, though, that neither negative thinking nor positive thinking is more real or true than the other. Either way of thinking could be real or true. But what does make one way of thinking more real is the one you choose to think and believe. As Shakespeare said, 'For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.'

Your thoughts can be understood as your 'self-talk' or your 'inner voice'. Your self-talk provides you with a running commentary rather like the constant text at the bottom of a 24-hour news channel. This self-talk directs your thinking and shapes your beliefs, expectations and actions.

Self-talk has a way of creating its own reality. Telling yourself you can do something can help it happen. Telling yourself you *can't* do something can make it more likely to be true. And because your brain speaks with your own voice, whatever it says, it feels real and it feels true.

## Positive Thinking

To a greater or lesser extent, we simply accept particular beliefs and ways of thinking. That's all well and good if those thoughts are helpful and constructive. It's not so good if those ways of thinking are negative and produce thoughts and feelings that are unhelpful and self-defeating.

### **Positive intentions of negative thinking**

So if positive thinking is the most helpful, beneficial way to think, why do we think in negative ways? Let's start by trying to understand this.

Negative ways of thinking are an aspect of emotions such as fear, worry, anxiety, disappointment, guilt, shame, regret, resentment and jealousy. Often, these emotions include thoughts such as 'I can't do that', 'I'm scared', 'It's not fair', 'I'm such an idiot', 'It's *his* fault', 'It's *her* fault', 'Nothing ever goes right for me' and 'I wish I hadn't done that.'

We usually think of emotions like fear, worry, disappointment etc. as 'negative emotions'. Why? Because they make us feel bad. And yet, these emotions, like all other emotions, do actually have a positive intent.

Take, for example, the emotion of guilt. Typically, the thoughts that accompany guilt are 'I've screwed up, I shouldn't have done that, it's my fault. I feel bad about what I did.'



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How can this way of thinking be positive? Well, the positive intent of guilt is to prompt you to recognize your wrongdoing and then to think about and take action to put right or make up for what you did wrong.

If, though, when you feel guilty you simply wallow in your guilt, beat yourself up about what you did wrong or try and suppress or deny how you feel, then your thoughts and actions (or lack of action) remain negative. Those thoughts and actions or inactions do you no good whatsoever.

The positive intentions of ‘negative’ emotions act in the same way as the positive intention of physical pain. If, for example, you touch something really hot, the pain makes you pull away. It feels bad, but the positive intention of that pain is to protect you. It’s the same with emotional pain; it can prompt you to take positive action.

What about a difficult emotion such as regret? How can that be positive? The positive intent of regret is to prompt you to learn from what you now wish you had or hadn’t done; to behave differently in future. Regret is only negative when you are stuck in regret; you allow it to keep you there and leave you feeling defeated and hopeless. But it’s not the emotion that’s negative, it’s your thinking and lack of positive response!

Furthermore, the fact that you know that emotions such as guilt and regret make you feel bad can actually motivate you, too. They can motivate you *not* to do something that could result in you feeling guilty or regretful.

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### **Narrow perspectives**

Emotions such as guilt, fear, anger, sadness and regret narrow your perspective and your thinking. There is a good reason for this; narrowed thinking focuses your attention on the ‘negative’ situation so that it becomes the *only* thing you can think about in order that you take action. Positive action. Again, just like putting your hand on something hot, all your attention is focused on it, and your response is positive (and quick!).

Supposing, for example, you’re anxious about a test or an exam. The positive intent of anxiety is to focus your thoughts on what you need to revise. It starts to work against you, though, if the anxiety overwhelms you.

Or, supposing one Friday evening you notice a mole on your arm that seems different. You’re worried about it. Worry forces you to think about little else over the weekend other than getting to see a doctor on Monday. It’s annoying that you can think of little else, but the fact that you are so preoccupied makes it likely you’ll go and see the doctor and get the mole checked out.

Another example of an emotion that narrows and focuses your thinking is sadness. Sadness helps you to slow down enough to take in and adjust to your loss.

Emotions such as sadness, anxiety, worry and guilt might not feel good yet they do have beneficial aspects if you respond to them positively. If you don’t act positively on those emotions, if you let them overwhelm you, they

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can contract and distort your world and keep you feeling bad.

In contrast, 'positive' emotions such as hope, compassion and happiness and their associated positive thoughts, can expand your world and the possibilities in it.

### **Broad perspectives**

Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson's research at the University of Carolina shows that positive emotions broaden your sense of possibilities and open your mind, which in turn allows you to see more possibilities and options in a range of situations in your life.

In an experiment by Fredrickson, groups of people were shown different film clips. The first two groups were shown clips that created feelings of contentment and joy. The last two groups were shown clips that provoked feelings of fear and anger. Afterwards, each participant was asked to imagine themselves in a situation where similar negative or positive feelings would arise and to write down as many ways as they could think of that they could respond.

Participants who had seen images of fear and anger wrote down a few responses. Meanwhile, the participants who saw images of joy and contentment wrote down a significantly higher number of actions that they would take.

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A University of Toronto study even suggests that what we *see* can be affected by a positive or negative outlook; that positive or negative thinking can change the way our visual cortex – the part of the brain responsible for processing visual information – operates. The study showed that when in a positive mood, our visual cortex takes in more information, while negative moods result in tunnel vision. It would appear that seeing the world through rose-coloured glasses is more than a metaphor!

Positive emotions and their associated positive thoughts open you up to new ideas and new experiences and possibilities. You feel positive about situations and other people. Ten years ago Lou worked for a local government authority. Here, he explains how his perspective differed from that of his colleague, Ned:

I was offered redundancy from my job. Although it wasn't a brilliant redundancy package, I took it.

Telling my friend Ned about it, he thought I was mad to take redundancy; I had two children and my wife was expecting another child. I explained to Ned how free I felt and I told him about my plans to start an online greetings card business.

Ned still thought I was mad; all he could see were the risks. But my view of the world was one of opportunity and new horizons. Of course I realized it wasn't going to be easy but I would be free from the rat race, I would be my own boss, my time would be more flexible, and I would get to see my wife and children a lot more than I had in the past. I was excited about the possibilities

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opening up to me. And if it didn't work out I would do whatever it took to get back into employment.

Ned didn't understand. He told me that for him, the security of a full-time job was the most important thing. He said that even though he really didn't enjoy his job – it was stressful, he hated his boss and he often worked long hours – he couldn't see any other way. He felt trapped.

Well, as it turned out, I worked at my business for three years and made a reasonable living from it. And I got to spend a lot of time with the children. I eventually sold the business because my wife was made redundant and we figured I'd have a better chance of getting a well-paid employed job. She had also reached a point where *she* wanted to spend more time at home.

Lou's positive thinking reflects an open mind and broadens his ideas, thoughts and actions whereas Ned's negative thinking limits and narrows his world, his opportunities and choices.

Positive thinking brings hope; the feeling that what you want *can* happen or that events *can* turn out for the best. Negative thinking creates a spiral of unhelpful thoughts and difficult feelings. Even when good things happen, negative thinkers tend to see the negative aspects of a situation.

Of course, everybody's view of the world is different, but if you think life is mostly good, you'll notice opportunities and good things in your life; if you think life is difficult, you will find obstacles and difficulties in life.

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### How positive are you?

Are you inclined to be a negative thinker or are you more of a positive thinker? Do you know what sort of events and situations are more likely to trigger a negative or positive response from you? Below is a range of situations. Read each statement and tick whichever way of thinking or behaving you'd be most likely to take.

1. If I had to pull out of going to an important event with a friend and I felt guilty about it:
  - a) I'd think of a way to make it up to her.
  - b) I'd know she was annoyed with me and so I'd avoid her until I thought she'd forgotten about it.
2. If someone – friend, family member, colleague – lets me know they need to speak with me about something, I think:
  - a) I wonder what this might be about?
  - b) I wonder what the problem is? I wonder what I've done wrong.
3. If I was involved in a work project with other people who were not getting on and not working well together I'd most likely think:
  - a) We can find a way to sort it out, there has to be a solution that will make things easier for everybody.
  - b) This is never going to change – it's our manager's fault – he should've known we wouldn't all get on. Why did I have to be involved with this?

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4. Something unexpected comes up which forces you to change your holiday plans. You think:
  - a) How am I going to work round this? What are my options?
  - b) Why does this *always* happen to me? My plans are all ruined.
5. Someone congratulates you on a piece of work you've done. You say:
  - a) Thanks. I'm pleased with what I did.
  - b) Thanks, but it wasn't that good. And then you tell them about the aspects that didn't go so well.
6. At work, you are asked to join a team working on an interesting project. You know that the first person to be asked to join the team was unavailable. You think:
  - a) Great! This will be an interesting opportunity and it'll be my chance to show what I can do.
  - b) They only asked me because the other person couldn't do it. It wouldn't have occurred to them to ask me first.
7. In elections:
  - a) I vote for who I think could make a difference; the person I believe will actually get things done.
  - b) There's absolutely no point in voting. Things *never* change, *all* politicians are rubbish, and anyway, my vote won't make any difference whatsoever.
8. Your company plans to dismiss 10% of its workforce on grounds of redundancy. Your reaction to the news:

(Continued)

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- a) I'm going to start thinking about what I might do next; I'll start finding out what other opportunities there might be.
  - b) It's bound to be me. It's not fair.
9. You trip over and twist your ankle. You think:
- a) Oh no! Still, it could've been worse, at least I didn't break my ankle.
  - b) That'll teach me! I *knew* I shouldn't have sneaked off work today; I *thought* something would go wrong. It's my punishment.
10. When choosing from the menu at a restaurant:
- a) I usually find it quite easy to decide what to eat.
  - b) I often regret my choice and wish I'd chosen something else.
11. You do better than you expected to in a test or exam. You think
- a) That's great!
  - b) I don't know how that happened. It was a fluke.
12. You work for a small company that's rapidly expanding. Your boss is leaving – you'd love her job. You:
- a) Ask her advice about applying for her job.
  - b) Decide you can't say anything – you'll have to wait to be asked to apply.
13. You have to be at work at 9:00am. It is 8:45am and you're still waiting in a traffic jam. You think:
- a) I need to call and let work know that I'm running late. At least that important meeting isn't till 9:30am.
  - b) I shouldn't have taken this route! Now the whole day is going to turn out wrong.



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14. You've always wanted to work part time so that you can write a novel/train as a singer/yoga teacher. Now, thanks to your partner's recent pay rise and their encouragement, you can just about afford to do it. You:
  - a) Start making plans.
  - b) Dismiss the idea. Supposing the novel is crap, you are no good at singing or no one comes to your yoga classes?
15. You have to drive somewhere new. You're anxious about getting lost. You think:
  - a) I'll need to plan my route; how to get there and what breaks to make.
  - b) I just know I'll get lost. I'll get stressed. I won't know where I'm going or what I'm doing.
16. You tell a friend something personal and although you've asked her not to, she tells another person. You:
  - a) Talk to her about it and explain how let down and upset you feel and ask her why she broke a confidence.
  - b) Think of all the other times she's let you down. You seek out someone else (who has also been let down by this friend) to talk about it and to confirm that your friend is a bitch.
17. You work in retail. You once thought it was what you wanted but it bores you. You now have the opportunity to apply for a job where you'll be more active.
  - a) You jump at the chance and apply.

*(Continued)*

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- b) You hesitate. You worry you are about to make another wrong choice.
18. Yesterday you stayed an hour late to complete a report. Your manager tells you she no longer needs the report for the meeting. You think:
- a) Damn! Oh well, some of what I wrote up will come in useful for another project or meeting.
  - b) She must know how much time I spent writing this! I've done it all for nothing. What a complete waste of time. She's obviously decided to wind me up.
19. If you have friends over for a meal, you:
- a) Make a decent meal and enjoy having the company.
  - b) Spend time on every aspect of the meal, candles, flowers etc. and get stressed about getting it all just right.
20. When you read your friends' social media posts it would appear that everyone is doing well in life. You think:
- a) Good for them!
  - b) It just gets me down when I compare myself with them.

If you answered mostly a) – you are more of a positive thinker.

If you answered mostly b) – you are more of a negative thinker.

Look back at the answers. Notice how 'b)' answers all reflect the narrow thinking that contracts your world

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and limits your opportunities and possibilities. In contrast, 'a)' answers all reflect positive thinking that opens up possibilities and opportunities for you.

### **Cognitive distortions**

Negative ways of thinking are often referred to as 'cognitive distortions'; illogical, irrational and unhelpful ways of thinking. Cognitive distortions are powerful because they can easily convince you that your thoughts *are* rational and true. But actually they are unhelpful; they misrepresent and limit your options. They can make you feel bad about the world, other people, yourself and your abilities.

Cognitive distortions are based on automatic thinking patterns that have been playing over and over in your mind, unchallenged, for years.

If you are predominantly a negative thinker, you may have a tendency to fall into particular patterns of cognitive distortions or negative thinking. Below are some examples.

#### ***Confirmation bias***

Confirmation bias involves consciously or unconsciously looking for evidence to support and confirm what you've already decided is true, while avoiding or ignoring contradictory information.

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You give too much weight to negative supporting information and opinions and too little to the positive elements of a situation.

For example, you tell a friend something personal and she tells another person. You feel betrayed. You then find yourself thinking back and noticing all sorts of ‘wrong’ behaviour from your friend that you have never given much thought to before. And then you seek out someone else (who doesn’t like this friend) to talk about it and to confirm that your friend is a bitch. But you forget or ignore all the other ways in the past that your friend has been a good friend.

Another example would be if you tripped over and twisted your ankle and you thought, ‘That’ll teach me! I *knew* I shouldn’t have sneaked off work today; I *thought* something would go wrong. It’s my punishment.’ Because you already feel you were wrong to sneak off work, you look for and accept evidence that you *have* done wrong. Rather than accept that you just weren’t looking where you were going, you conclude that twisting your ankle just goes to confirm your wrongdoing.

### ***Jumping to a conclusion***

This involves judging or deciding something without having all the relevant information. You anticipate that things will turn out badly. For example, if, when someone lets you know that they need to speak with you about something, you immediately think ‘It’s something I’ve done wrong’, then you jumped to a conclusion. Or if

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you heard that redundancies were to be announced and you thought ‘It’s bound to be me. It’s not fair’, then you jumped to a conclusion. Instead of waiting until you have more information, you immediately react with a negative conclusion.

### ***Tunnel thinking, polarized thinking and perfectionist thinking***

Imagine looking down a cardboard tube. What can you see? Or rather, what can’t you see? With tunnel thinking, you are blind to other possibilities and options. Instead of seeing the whole picture, you focus on the negative aspects. So if, for example, you are forced to change your holiday plans, and your thoughts are ‘Why does this *always* happen to me? My plans are all ruined.’ then you make it difficult to recognize that there are, in fact, other ways of thinking and doing things; you do have options.

Tunnel thinking is related to polarized thinking. It’s ‘all or nothing’ thinking. With polarized thinking, there’s no middle ground or grey areas. Things are black or white, good or bad, a success or a total failure, clever or stupid, there is no middle ground, no room for mistakes and no room for improvement.

These types of thoughts are often characterized by terms such as ‘should’ or ‘shouldn’t’, ‘must’ or ‘mustn’t’, ‘every’, ‘always’ or ‘never’. For example, ‘There’s *absolutely no point* in voting. Things *never* change, *all* politicians are rubbish, and anyway, my vote won’t make *any* difference.’

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Also related to tunnel thinking and polarized thinking is perfectionist thinking. For example, if someone congratulates you on a piece of work you've done and you say; 'Thanks, but it wasn't that good,' and then tell them about the aspects that didn't go so well. In situations like this, for you, things have to be perfect or they don't count.

### ***Catastrophizing***

When you catastrophize, you work yourself up and think your way to disaster. You think the worst is going to happen in a situation. For example, if you have to drive somewhere new and you think 'I just know I'll get completely lost; I'll get confused and stressed; I won't know where I'm going; I won't know what to do,' then you're catastrophizing. That's fine if the worst case scenario prompts you to make plans to ensure the worst doesn't happen. But it's not helpful if anticipating the worst simply serves to overwhelm and paralyze you.

### ***Mind reading***

With mind reading, you believe you know what the other person is thinking and that their thoughts and intentions are negative. For example, if, when asked to work on an interesting project at work you thought: 'They only asked me because the other person couldn't do it. It wouldn't have occurred to them to ask me first', then you were mind reading. With this example, your negative thinking could undermine your confidence or make you feel resentful and so affect your ability to do well.

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### ***Blaming***

This involves placing all responsibility for something that's gone wrong on someone or something else. If you see yourself as externally controlled, you see yourself as helpless, a victim of other people or external factors. If a group of people at work weren't working well together on a project and you thought 'This is never going to change – it's our manager's fault – he should've known this wouldn't work. Why did I have to be involved with this?' Blaming your manager for what's going wrong means that you feel (wrongly) that there's nothing you can do to put things right. You're at the mercy of others.

You might, though, place all the blame on yourself if things don't turn out well. Rightly or wrongly you may feel completely responsible for the well-being of others and the way events turn out. If things don't go well you feel guilty and blame yourself. That's fine if you are responsible and you do something to put things right, but it's not helpful if self-blame is misguided or it overwhelms you and prevents you from taking positive action.

### ***Your explanatory style***

Cognitive distortions and negative thinking patterns, then, narrow and reduce your options and opportunities and convince you that you have little or no control over your circumstances.

It's easy to assume that your negative thoughts are rational and true. But actually, they are limiting, unhelpful

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and even destructive. They can overwhelm you and trigger further unhelpful thoughts and reactions.

Because the way you think is habitual, you usually don't even recognize the nature of your thoughts and reactions to events. In fact, your thoughts are so powerful *because* you rarely have conscious awareness or control over them. Your mind simply accepts everything it's 'told' and you respond accordingly.

Many of your patterns of thinking and behaving will have developed over the years as a result of such things as your upbringing, family, friends, environment, education, media influences, religion and culture.

As we go about our daily life, our minds are continually thinking; interpreting and assessing our experiences, events and situations. But our brains have a limited ability to process everything that's going on. To make sense of what's going on, we've each developed an 'explanatory style'. This means that when something happens, has happened or is going to happen, your brain makes sense of it in a way that fits with your usual way of understanding events.

You have a system in your brain called the 'reticular activating system (RAS)' that controls your consciousness. The RAS filters out everything that doesn't support your most prevalent thoughts and behaviour. So, your mind has a tendency to, first and foremost, notice and pay attention to experiences that match its preexisting thoughts and beliefs.



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If you're more inclined to think negatively, your brain will automatically interpret events in these negative ways. On the other hand, if you're more inclined to positive thinking, your brain will interpret and make sense of events in positive ways. And, whichever way you're inclined to think, each time you do, you reinforce that particular way of thinking, interpreting and explaining things.

Repeated negative ways of thinking can lead to a concept known as 'learned helplessness'.

This means that, in effect, you 'learn' or 'teach' yourself that you have little or no control over what happens to you, other people, situations and events.

Furthermore, having 'learned' to believe in your limitations and lack of control, you resign yourself to believing that more often than not, you are helpless and situations are often hopeless. Even if you become aware of your negative thinking, it can be a real struggle to think otherwise.

A constant stream of negative thoughts in your mind has prevented you from doing any creative problem-solving. The good news, though, is that your way of interpreting events does not have to be permanent and your outlook is not fixed. You *can* learn to think in a more positive, helpful way. You *can* overcome negative thinking by learning new, positive 'explanatory styles'.

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### **Your amazing brain**

It helps to further understand what's going on in your brain.

The core components of the brain are neurons; cells that process and transmit information. Neurons are connected to each other by neural pathways and networks.

So, when you think or do something new, a new neural pathway is created. Each time you think or behave in that particular way, your brain uses that same neural pathway. The pathway becomes stronger and stronger each time it's used. It's just like walking through a field of long grass – the more often that path is trodden, the more established the path becomes and the more likely it is that you'll take that path.

This is hugely beneficial to you because it means that if you do something often enough, it becomes automatic – you don't have to think about it. Think of the things you do on a daily basis that your brain and body are so used to that they don't even have to think about it – walking, talking, eating, brushing your teeth, driving, texting, etc.

However, this same process of neural pathways developing automatic ways of doing and thinking also establishes habits that are not so good for you: smoking, overeating, drinking, negative thinking and so on.

If you often interpret events in a negative way, then you create strong negative neural pathways in your brain.

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Those neural pathways become so established that they also become habits; negative thinking habits that leave little or no room for more positive, helpful ways of thinking.

All is not lost! The good news is that if you change how you think or what you do, then new, positive neural pathways are formed. The RAS in your brain becomes more aware of and tuned in to positive events and possibilities. When you continue using these new positive pathways, they become stronger and deeper. Eventually, they will replace the old ways of thinking and behaving. You will have rewired – or reprogrammed – your brain.

Imagine, for example, that you need to learn to use your left hand instead of your right hand to write with a pen. It will take time and effort, because the neural pathway for using your right hand is well established. But if you really want to do it, you can forge new pathways and develop a new way of writing with a different hand.

The same is true for anything you want to do or any way you would like to think. Certainly it takes effort to change the way you think, but it is not impossible and it's never too late!

### **In a nutshell**

- What you think and say to yourself can have quite an impact on what you can and can't do. Think positively and you'll feel able to manage. Think

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negatively and you're likely to feel overwhelmed and powerless.

- Emotions such as sadness, worry and guilt and their associated thoughts might not feel good yet they do have beneficial aspects: to prompt you to respond in helpful, positive ways.
- If you let 'negative' emotions and their negative thoughts overwhelm you, they can contract and distort your world and make you feel bad. Negative thoughts create a spiral of difficult thoughts and feelings.
- Cognitive distortions – such as confirmation bias, catastrophizing, mind reading and blaming – can easily convince you that your thoughts are rational and true. But actually, they are limiting and unhelpful.
- Because the way you think is habitual, you usually don't even recognize the nature of your thoughts and reactions to events. Your mind simply accepts everything it's 'told' and you respond accordingly.
- Whichever way you're inclined to think – positively or negatively – each time you do, you reinforce that particular way of thinking, interpreting and explaining things.
- Positive emotions and their associated positive thoughts open you up to new ideas and new experiences and possibilities. Positive thinking brings hope.
- You *can* overcome negative thinking by learning new 'explanatory styles': positive thinking.