

How To Feel Good When Your Life Isn't Perfect

Most people have thoughts and dreams about how their lives ought to be. When things don't work out the way they had pictured, they tend to blame other people or situations.

They don't realize that the bad feelings come from their own thinking.

"When things are bad, people say to themselves, 'Things aren't the way I like them,' and then say, 'That's terrible, that's awful' - meaning they think things are so bad that they shouldn't or mustn't be that way," says Albert Ellis, Ph.D., the creator of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy and author of *Feeling Better, Getting Better, Staying Better*.

It's normal, however, to have to deal with difficult situations and difficult people as you go through life.

Here's how to change your thinking, so you can feel good when your life isn't perfect.

Unconditionally accept yourself

Most people want to do well in order to feel good about themselves and be loved by the significant people in their lives. But this way of thinking can make you feel crazy.

"It's important to accept yourself whether or not you do well and whether people who are important to you love you," says Dr. Ellis. "Don't think, 'I have to do well,' because then, if you don't, you'll worry. Instead, just prefer to do well. Even when people are doing well and being loved by significant people, they worry about tomorrow."

Don't over-generalize

You can evaluate what you think, feel and do, but don't give yourself a generalized rating. You're like a diamond in the making and have many facets. Some shine brilliantly, and others still need to be polished.

"People generalize and say, 'I failed a few times, and I might fail again.' That's true enough, but then they stupidly over-generalize and say, 'I failed a few times, and I'm a failure.' You can't be a failure or a success," says Dr. Ellis. "But you can fail at things and be successful at things."

Even evaluating yourself as a good person creates stress, because you'll always have to live up to your image and do good things. The truth is that you do thousands of things - some good, some bad.

Unconditionally accept others

You may get angry with relatives, friends, co-workers or other people because of things they've done. You'll feel far less miserable if you feel disappointed, instead.

"You can think, 'I don't like their behavior, but they're fallible humans who sometimes do good and sometimes behave badly. I can accept them and not make myself incensed or furious at them.'" says Dr. Ellis. "You can judge their behavior as bad or wicked, but never judge them, as people, as bad, evil or rotten."

This doesn't mean you should tolerate bad behavior. You can still try to get them to change how they behave, but you can do it without anger.

Unconditionally accept life

Many bad things may happen to you in your life, but you don't have to view them as terrible, because you can handle them and even be happy in spite of them. Therefore, it's not the bad things that upset you - it's your view of them.

Feeling bad comes from demanding that something turn out a certain way.

"A demand says, 'I have to have something, or to have something turn out a certain way, and it's terrible and I'm no good if I don't have it,'" says Dr. Ellis. "You don't need life to be good. It's preferable, of course - highly preferable - but it's not a necessity."

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It's Time to Think Positive

A positive attitude, faith and good relationships with others can make you healthier, experts agree.

No one's sure exactly how some of these factors contribute to good health, but study after study shows they do.

"People who are basically optimistic feel better and live longer than those who aren't," says James S. Gordon, M.D., founder and director of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in Washington, DC.

A positive attitude depends on genetic influences, upbringing, health habits, social connections, emotional support and spiritual involvement. You can't change some of these factors, but you can learn new ways of thinking and behavior to help maintain a positive mind-set -- and live a healthier life.

"Your beliefs about a particular situation are very important in terms of your immune system's response to stress. The more optimistic you are, the higher the level and function of key immune cells in your body," says psychologist Suzanne Segerstrom, Ph.D., an assistant professor at the University of Kentucky. "While a stronger immune system doesn't necessarily mean you feel better, it does affect how easily you get sick, or how well you respond to or recover from illness or surgery."

So does having a good connection to family, friends and acquaintances. In general, social ties guard against stress and contribute to a positive attitude. Researchers have proven that they also help you survive major illnesses and heal more quickly.

"A strong social support system encourages better health habits," says psychiatrist Redford B. Williams, M.D., director of behavioral research at Duke University Medical Center. Company can also ward off depression.

Experts warn, however, that some people feel more comfortable being alone. If forging ties to family and friends actually stresses you out, you're better off respecting your need for solitude rather than trying to become someone you're not, suggests Dr. Segerstrom.

"As you practice healthy habits, you affect your health, positively," says Dr. Gordon. "You soon feel the results of your efforts. That reinforces not only a positive attitude, but also the control you now have over your life -- to make it the best it can be."

Lonely Hearts

A study of heart patients helped convince psychiatrist Redford B. Williams of the importance of good social relationships. He looked at 1,368 coronary disease patients at Duke University in 1998 and found:

- Of the patients who reported feeling very isolated, weren't married and had no one to confide in, 50 percent died within five years.
- Just 17 percent of patients with a confidant or close spouse died in that same period.

The different mortality rates could not be explained by differences in the severity of the underlying heart disease. Dr. Williams' conclusion: "People without good social relations are at an increased risk for developing cardiovascular disease. Once they have the disease, they're apt to experience recurrent heart problems."

What about folks who like to be alone? Dr. Williams speculates that loneliness, like high cholesterol, may be just one risk factor for heart disease -- not every person who is lonely or has high cholesterol will become ill.

How Stress Hurts

Some of us handle stressful situations better than others. When you succumb to stress, Ohio State University researchers say, you trigger a process that shows the link between your mental and physical health:

- When you're under stress, your brain increases production of CRF (corticotropin-releasing factor).
- CRF stimulates your hypothalamus to increase the production of ACTH (adrenocorticotrophic hormone).
- ACTH tells the adrenal gland to produce cortisol, an immune-suppressing hormone.
- The more cortisol, the weaker your immune cells -- and the more susceptible you are to illness.

Positive Steps

A positive attitude and healthy social behaviors can affect your health. Here's what you can do:

- Evaluate and defuse stressful situations. Weigh what's important and what's not. Take a few deep breaths. Instead of getting upset, seek out a simple distraction.
- Try meditation. It may be difficult at first to sit still and do nothing, but you'll be amazed at how relaxed you can feel.
- Get in touch. Cultivate a network of friends and acquaintances. Make sure there's someone you feel close to, a confidant who can provide support.
- Let go. Express your feelings. When you allow yourself room to feel and show emotions, you reduce stress and a tendency toward pessimism. But don't dwell on your emotions -- move on.
- Take care of yourself. Get plenty of sleep, eat healthful foods and exercise. All contribute to your overall well-being.
- Team up with your doctor. When you're actively involved in medical decisions, you take control over your body and your health.

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