



Image courtesy of Freedigitalphotos.net

(Terence Cole) Shawn Achor is the Head Teaching Fellow for “Positive Psychology,” the most popular course at Harvard University. In a lecture at One Day University Achor spoke about the differences between traditional psychology and positive psychology, and demonstrated how positive psychology can be used to bring people to new levels of happiness and success.

Achor asserts that the point of traditional psychology is to return a person back to normal. However, what he studies is positive psychology, which observes the positive outliers of success in the world, people who have exceptional levels of energy, happiness, resilience, musical, intellectual, or artistic abilities, in order to learn from them. By learning from the positive exceptions, he demonstrates that the overall average of people can be brought up. The goal of positive psychology is to bring people to higher levels of positivity and performance than the norm.

His work is based on the premise that the lens through which we view the world shapes our experience of the world, and that even our bodies and immune system respond to how we view the world around us.

Achor also states that environment is not very predictive of a person’s happiness level long term. He found that control or understanding of an environment can only predict 10% of an individual’s happiness. His research showed that 90% of happiness is not because of our external world, but the lens through which we view it, and that the lens is created by experiences and genetics.

One of his biggest observations is that happiness can be a precursor to success, not just the result of success. When the brain experiences happiness or positive thoughts dopamine is released, which increases a person's level of pleasure and turns on the learning centers of the brain. His research found that if you can get someone to be positive while performing tasks, you can dramatically increase the levels of intelligence, intellectual resources, creativity, and productivity available to that person.

Another interesting idea that Achor utilizes in his research is called the Tetris Effect. When a person plays Tetris for too long he tends to want to apply his Tetris skills to regular life. This creates a loop in his mind. A person can be stuck in a positive loop or a negative loop, depending on what experiences are repeated. For example, tax auditors can be good at looking for mistakes in tax returns. However, if they are stuck in their work loop when they return home and scrutinize their home lives in this same manner, they will have relationship problems.

Another concept that he refers to comes from science. In chemistry, activation energy is required in order for a chemical reaction to occur. In order to catalyze a reaction, a small amount of energy must be expended initially, in order for a large amount of energy to be released by the reaction.

It works the same in our minds. If you want to increase the likelihood of change, then lower the initial energy that must be expended for that change to take place. For instance, if you want to work out after work, rather than go home before the gym, put your gym clothes in your car and drive directly to the gym after work.

The reverse is also true. If there is a habit that you'd like to change, then make it more difficult for you to indulge in the habit. If you want to watch less television, then remove the batteries to the remote and place them in a room where the television isn't. You may still end up watching television, but the extra activation energy required to do so will make you think twice about sitting down to watch it.

Critics pointed out to Achor that many great artists and musicians were depressed and were still able to create great works of art. Achor is not saying this isn't possible, but he is stating that all things being equal, the brain functions better when positive, than when stressed, neutral, or depressed.

Achor admits that negatives are part of the world, and that they allow us to learn and experience a range of emotions. However, he's saying that if you raise your emotional baseline, then when you experience downs they will be shorter, and that overall you will demonstrate higher levels of creativity, intelligence, and engagement on tasks that you work on.

Your Action Plan:

If you want to make your outlook on life more positive for the long term, then Achor has a five-step plan that you should follow. According to William James, the father of modern psychology, if a person does the same action for 21 days straight, then a life habit will be created. Thus, following Achor's plan for 21 days consecutively is key. You may think these ideas are common sense, but remember that common sense may not be common practice, and that information is not necessarily transformation.

21 Days to Positivity Challenge:

- 1) Gratitude - Write in detail three different things you are grateful for each day.
- 2) Journaling - Write for five minutes about one positive experience you've had in the past 24 hours.
- 3) Exercise - Three to five days per week.
- 4) Meditation - Meditate daily for 20 to 30 minutes.
- 5) Random Acts of Kindness - Email someone a "thank you" note or compliment about something daily when you first open your email.

What you think about has a direct effect on how you feel, and you can use Achor's plan to change your thinking in order to increase the level of positivity in your life. It only takes a few minutes each day to become a more positive you. Give it a try!



Terence Cole, Senior Life & Culture Editor

Terence Cole is a graduate of the University of Oklahoma. He enjoys foreign languages, cultures and loves traveling around the world. He has lived in North America, Europe, and Asia, and is currently working in Korea.

Copyright ©2011 The Weissman Report, a Bernstein Media Corporation company. All rights reserved. Reproduction of material from any Weissman Report pages without written permission is strictly prohibited.