



A Season of Happiness



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Attitude

One thing you can change to be a better person

No matter what you do in life, there are always strings attached. In effect, nothing is for nothing. I'm not just talking money here - this is about consideration, responsibility and, in particular, effort. For most of us, it doesn't come naturally. We have to think, usually before we make a move, or say a word. If we don't, there will be consequences we'd have preferred to avoid. Sound familiar? Trouble is, quite often we don't take time to assess a situation before responding to it. We don't need to because we have been endowed with a pre-programmed adviser. It has been with us since we were first conceived and will continue to guide our responses to every situation until our dying day. It's called attitude. It is the ball we carry with us, the one we toss instinctively at everything we encounter; and, believe you me, the string that attaches it to us is not only unbreakable - it is also elastic. The harder we throw it, the faster it comes back; and the more it hurts when it hits.

There seems, however, little point in writing an article that people won't read because it annoys or offends them; and attitude, by its presence alone, stimulates this kind of response. No matter that the words are helpful or encouraging, someone who is growing tired of being told that they are doing everything wrong will see just another lecture coming and they've simply had enough. In effect, past experience is shaping their mood, and this governs their response to every new eventuality. So, how do you help someone improve their general attitude to life when they are going to think and say: "For pity's sake, leave me alone. Haven't I got enough on my plate already?" Should you even try? After all, everyone has a life and they should be allowed to lead it the way they want. Unfortunately, the attitude of individuals affects everyone they come in contact with. It would have to be the prime motivator of conflict and misunderstandings and the cause of stress and strife the world over. Learning how to control and perhaps change it must surely be a good thing. That being the case, maybe I'd be better looking at it from a practical viewpoint.

It's a beautiful day. The sun is shining and birds are singing. The roof didn't blow off in the night and the coming day promises to be no more daunting than any other. There's no apparent reason to be in a bad mood, yet that's just the way we feel, and woe betide anyone who upsets us. We are very aware of this negative approach. It has been around for a while and seems to be worsening. Whatever sparked it in the first place has probably been forgotten, but it is very difficult to shake an attitude which is fast becoming a habit. Left to its own devices it will cement itself as a dominant feature of our personality which others come to expect and respond to in kind. When negativity starts turning into a way of life, it takes control to the point where we change into a person nobody likes, including ourselves.

Of course, the opposite can also be true. There are those who breeze through life with a permanent smile and never seem to be dismayed or disadvantaged by whatever crops up. For these people, each new event that presents itself has a better-than-even chance of being resolved amicably. It would be nice to be like this, but it isn't easy, not when the current mood is so negative. That's attitude for you - even wanting to be happy can be soured when you simply don't feel like it. Imagine having a bad day and sitting down in front of the TV to watch a comedy. It's hard to raise a smile, and even if there's a laugh track it can make matters worse. More irritation, more negativity. To get on top of this issue, we have to start thinking positively. We have to return to basics and figure out where our bad attitude comes from and how to change it.

A few simple home-truths have to be accepted first. Number one is admitting the presence of attitude and that it is affecting our lives. "I don't have an attitude!" you might say. Actually,

everyone does, especially that someone who argues vehemently that they don't. If you aren't sure what kind you have, watch the six o'clock news, or pick up a newspaper and read some of the headlines. There is bound to be a reaction as opinions are formed on the different stories. It is unlikely that any are about you personally, yet your response to each will be affected by your current attitude. So, you may feel sympathetic to one, while being aggravated by another. The tell-tale reports are those that stimulate a strong reaction, or solicit a response inappropriate to the tone of the piece. A story about a happy event shouldn't make you sad or miserable. If it does, your attitude is at odds with the flavour. You could be recalling a past association which was similar but didn't turn out as well for you; or your present mood simply isn't compatible with anything remotely pleasing. Maybe you just don't feel like smiling. But why?

Frame of mind is set by the past, those experiences that have already left their mark. Saying that a person has got out of bed the wrong side isn't as ludicrous as it sounds, not when you consider that here is when the day starts. The night's sleep ought to have been a period of relaxation and refreshment; but someone who spent it tossing and turning as they mulled over problems isn't going to be the happiest of campers when they wake up. As for which side of bed they get out, there are two choices - collect up all the bad vibes from that night and drag them along, or leave them there and begin the new day with a positive attitude. In other words, be prepared to take each new event on its merits, and don't go looking for trouble.

It's possible there's a reason to be cynical and apprehensive, particularly when worrying over a forthcoming matter that is likely to be unpleasant. But what does that have to do with your partner, or the kids, or a neighbour? Why should they be made to suffer for something they have nothing to do with? And on the way to work, the motorist who makes a silly mistake doesn't do it on purpose to annoy you, so there's no justification for road rage. Your overriding problem has a time and place to be tackled. It can't be resolved over the breakfast table, or behind the wheel. Until you reach the point of confrontation, your anger and posturing are wasted energy and you are making yourself suffer unnecessarily. Even if you feel the need to steel yourself mentally beforehand, think about it - what will be achieved by storming into a meeting super-charged with aggression? Staying cool and acting calmly will have far more impact. Whether going up against a person or a situation, keeping a clear head is always the best option.

But this is almost impossible when you feel the way you do. Why is that? Can you remember what sparked it? Was it one thing, or a string of unhappy events that continue to worsen your mood? To be honest, do you really enjoy being miserable? Then again, you may think, at the end of the day, does any of this truly matter? Of course it does. Not only do we have to live with other people, but we also have to live with ourselves. I would ask you to keep an open mind and accept that past problems may shape our approach to the future, but not our attitude towards it. This is something we control. If we appreciate what life has to offer, rather than bemoaning what it throws at us, we are well on the way to happiness.

Understanding what will give us this is relatively simple - anything that lifts our spirits or makes us smile is just what we need to be happy. Focus on those moments and the good physical feelings that come with them. These are the best guides we have to what we truly want. Any discomfort is a warning that a current attitude is waiting to take over. Don't let it! If you use it to resolve a current issue, the outcome is more than likely to be regretted afterwards. Before you respond, pause and think of your best-case scenario. Never mind what your attitude is telling you - do what will keep you happy after the fact. And as soon as you have five minutes to yourself - that means when there are no up-coming issues to be dealt with that your attitude might affect - see if you can figure out what is causing the negativity.

Much like any other exercise, improving your attitude takes practice, and this is best done in private, or at least away from situations that require an immediate response. Your ultimate goal is to cultivate a natural optimism, the confidence to know that every outcome will be pleasant. I know: you are probably thinking never in a million years! That's your attitude making decisions for you again, all based on bad experiences from the past. If you can identify them, try to recall what happened and why they continue to make you feel the way you do. There's a lesson in them: perhaps mistakes made that don't need to be repeated; unfortunate situations which, if encountered in future, can be avoided; hasty decisions that proved wrong and you'll give more thought to next time. Most regrettable eventualities come about by reacting, or over-reacting, too

quickly, usually prompted by an inappropriate attitude. During those quiet moments, practice restraint and forethought. Re-live a bad experience, the reasons it occurred in the first place, how you handled it and the final result. Then go back and imagine changing your response to one that would have produced a satisfactory outcome. It may not work for you, not at first; not if your motivating attitude is stronger than your desire to be happy. But persevere and you will eventually get there.

Another tactic you can employ is something you will already be doing - picturing a future event and how it is likely to turn out. If the mere thought of it makes you cringe, this is exactly the kind of situation you need to prepare for, but with anticipation, not apprehension. Nudge the bad attitude aside and think about positive ways to resolve the issue in your favour. Appreciate that inner feeling of satisfaction and triumph over the win. Okay, so it's just in your mind - at the moment - but you *can* make it happen if you truly want to. Maybe the event doesn't need to occur at all. Have you thought of that? Are you heading towards a confrontation just because you are spoiling for a fight, in particular one you are convinced you can never win? Once again, that's not the real you - that's attitude! Consider whether you really need to see this person who is going to give you grief. Will it matter if you simply walk away? And if it has to be, put attitude back in its rightful place as the tactical guide and not your General. You aren't fighting a war, not even a battle - you are simply living your life, and you have every right to enjoy it.

And if you are wondering whether, by adopting a change of attitude and approach, you might miss out on something material or advantageous, compare the true value of what you could get with the eventual cost of getting it. Then decide if the end justifies the means.

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