



The Pitfalls of Positive Thinking - Affirmations Versus Optimism

Roger Elliott

I'm lucky enough to be a natural optimist. But I don't do positive thinking or affirmations. It's not that I don't think they work. They do for some people, it's just that there are more effective, healthy and easy ways to think!

Positive thinking affirmations claim to work by repetition. Basically, the harder you hit that unconscious mind of yours with the positive thinking hammer, the deeper the affirmation will go!

Do Positive Thinking Affirmations Cause Depression?

No, of course they don't, but the methods of thinking have a lot in common. That might be a little surprising so I'll explain...

Positive affirmations require you to come up with a set of sentences to repeat to yourself, or, for a small fee, you can repeat someone else's.

Benefits: All the time you're repeating your affirmations, you can't be thinking bad stuff about yourself.

Negatives: All the time you spend repeating your affirmations, you're not using your brain to creatively solve problems. And you may be teaching yourself a harmful thinking style.

But what has that got to do with depression? Well, there are several elements to a depressive thinking style. These have been identified through thousands of pieces of clinical research and are now well accepted within the psychology field.

Too much focus on the self. Lots of use of personal pronouns such as "I", "Me", "Myself"

Perfectionistic thinking: unless it's perfect, it's not worth feeling good about.

Globalisation: "Everything's ruined now"

Over-emotionality: responding to even minor events with extremes of emotion - excitement, anxiety, anger and so on.

So how does that compare to positive thinking affirmations?

A List of Typical Affirmations

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Every day in every way I'm getting better, better and better.</p> <p>Everything is coming to me easily and effortlessly.</p> <p>Everything I need is already within me.</p> <p>I <u>love</u> and appreciate myself just as I am.</p> <p>I accept all my feelings as part of myself.</p> | <p>I <u>love</u> doing my work, and I am richly rewarded creatively and financially.</p> <p>I always communicate clearly and effectively.</p> <p>I now have enough time, energy, wisdom and money to accomplish all my desires.</p> <p>My life is blossoming in <u>total perfection</u>.</p> <p>It's okay for me to have everything I want.</p> |
|--|---|

To help you see the similarity with the above depressive styles, I have created a key to show you the common elements:

- Red: Focus on self
- Underline: Perfectionism
- Bold: Globalisation

And as for over-emotionality, all positive thinking affirmations are designed to get you excited! And I'm not against excitement, but all things in moderation, as my grandma used to say...

Is The Message Really That Positive?

What about the message that these affirmations convey? Let's take a look at a few of them:

"Every day in every way I'm getting better, better and better." - Really? That's miraculous! I thought everybody has bad days?

"Everything is coming to me easily and effortlessly." - Whatever happened to "Success is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration"?

"Everything I need is already within me." - Now that is impressive. Most people have to learn new things all the time.

"I love and appreciate myself just as I am." - Well now I do feel bad, because there are some aspects of me, like laziness, that I really don't like at all, let alone love!

"I love doing my work, and I am richly rewarded creatively and financially." - How about, "some of the time I love doing my work, and at other times it's a chore, but I've made a commitment to do it, so I'm going to stick at it"?

"I always communicate clearly and effectively." - My self esteem is dropping lower by the moment. Some mornings the only person who can understand me is the dog.

"My life is blossoming in total perfection." - Oh, stop it will you?

"It's okay for me to have everything I want." - And more seriously, that's just downright dangerous. Impulse control is a vital part of mental health. A lack of it can lead to addiction, risky behaviour and violence.

So, does my criticism of positive thinking and affirmations make me negative?

No, not according to optimism tests. I'm about as optimistic as they come apparently. (Phew!)

I think that positive thinking affirmations can be bad for your mental health. And the reason why I have described above. You can make up your own mind whether you agree with me.

The alternative is to learn how to be optimistic; a realistic, usable way of thinking that will bolster you against mental ill health, help you enjoy life more, and actually improve your chances of having a successful life. Why? Well for one, because pessimists give up when optimists keep going. But that's another article...

[Click here for more Personal Development articles](#)