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CONVICT CHRONICLES: The Making of a Happy Inmate

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Approx. 1,500 words

Has anyone ever given you a slew of compliments and one criticism? What stands out to you? What do you remember? The compliments or the sole fault? Yeah, me too. It's normal. Human beings through eons of evolution are hardwired to notice and remember the bad sh*t. We are constantly walking around with our cups half full--no matter how much we may try otherwise. It is the result of thousands of years of survival instinct. It is so common it already has a name in social science circles.

They call it "negative bias" and it served an important function in early human development. Our ancestors lived dreadfully dangerous lives (by current standards) they were constantly on the look-out for what they could

eat or what may try to make a meal out of them. Hard lessons were learned. But in the modern world that is rarely an issue (prison life excluded) and that negative bias is skewing our perception of reality. Worse, without any counter-thinking to balance our psyche we may end up short circuited on DEFCON 1. We see our present as f&ck#ed and future as more of the same. That's not only a horrible way to live but a recipe for elevated levels of stress and anxiety which can lead to anger issues or depression and then, inevitably, manifest physically in sleepless nights, loss of appetite, and, too often, much darker outcomes. But there is light ahead.

"The Power of Bad" by Ray Baumeister Ph.D. and journalist John Tierney offers tried and tested strategies to keep us from drifting too far out into the moonless night.

1. Positive self-talk. It's all about shifting the balance on the seesaw of how we are interpreting our lives. Right now there's a fat kid on one end of your seesaw and your ass is stuck at the top.

Try this the next time you find yourself complaining.

A) Note you're b*tch*ing. Stop. Take a beat.

B) Think of four positive ways to see the problem.

According to Baumeister, four is the minimum amount of counter points necessary to settle your mind--pulling it out of the death spiral.

Due to new COVID related quarantine protocols, I have not been able to buy coffee in over a month. I drank my last cup three days ago. Instead of merely bemoaning my circumstances I thought of four positives:

saving money, beating an addiction, building character, and drinking more water. In this way I began to see running out of coffee as less of a problem and more of an opportunity. It didn't necessarily quell all my anger and frustration, but it did help ease the pain.

2. Victor Hugo once called melancholy the happiness of being sad. Nostalgia is defined as a longing for the past. They have both gotten a bad rap in the modern self-help zeitgeist, but the science points elsewhere. In countless experiments, those who remembered a positive past experience before having to undertake a difficult task (work, cleaning, working out) all self-reported to feeling better and with a brighter outlook than those in the control group. To reap the full benefits it helps to engage with the memory on a sensory level. Now, when I am getting ready to confront a dreadful experience (court date, blood test, et cetera) I take a minute to think back to my favorite beach in Mexico. I remember the way the soft powder sand felt between my toes; or how the waves sounded as they gently lapped against the coast; and how my cold beer tasted as it touched my lips-- even as I write this I can feel myself physically unclenching.

3. Celebrate your wins (but don't be a douche about it). You won your fantasy league, a Scrabble match, secured a new job? Good for you. Tell someone about it. Better yet, treat yourself to something nice. The goal here is to elongate the feeling when the universe smiles on you.

An interesting note, research finds that the benefits can be equally beneficial when you celebrate someone else's success. Bonus: When you celebrate others success you are seen as a kinder, smarter person and others will be more likely to want to celebrate your future successes.

But we won't always win or get that dream job, will we? This is when we need to re-frame the loss as a win.

Last week I got creamed in my football pool. I lost six bucks--sixty in World

money--it hurt. The truth was, I was never going to win. I don't follow football like that. It was a goof, something to do to offset the boredom.

And it worked. I made some new friends, learned a few things and am now anticipating next season. It gave me something to look forward to and in looking at it from that perspective I have reframed a loss into a win and that will affect how I feel about it.

The whole idea of "reframing" an experience reminds me of an article I read about how ex-offenders successfully reintergrate into society upon release. A common thread began to appear in the interviews of those ex-offenders who were able to acclimate quickly. They all reflected back on their prison experience as an opportunity to make positive changes, appreciate life, and focus on the present to manage stress. That doesn't mean you pretend everything is perfect. A few days ago, my cellmate and I were discussing some trivial cell issue- I don't even remember what the specifics were. He noted, much to my surprise, that I was shaking--clearly upset. I didn't particularly feel very upset nor could I consciously register having felt any resentment at that time, but my body was telling a different story. In most cases, I try to live by the mantra, "Don't Sweat The Small Stuff" out of a general "try to stay positive" mentality. But, obviously, this was an issue I cared about-at least on some subconscious level. I'd been repressing that feeling and was now becoming the very thing I abhorred: Petty. Right then I promised myself I would never let that happen again. I would be more aware of my emotions and address important issues head-on, otherwise, I had to learn to truly let go of things.

4. Check yourself. Why do you think you are a good cellmate? Baumeister might ask a group of inmates. Many might list what they do well, saying that maybe being respectful or clean gives them an edge. And it is good to be good. "But what makes more impact," says Baumeister, "is NOT doing the bad things." Because bad always outweighs good i.e., what you do is less important than what you don't do. Sometimes that means holding your tongue, he adds, and putting a lid on the judging and curtness for minor infractions. Of all of the book's suggestions, this one struck me as the most beneficial for current inmates. If we could re-wire our brain to think this way, our lives would surely be significantly improved.

5. Be a dog. Live in the present. Back in my hard-core partying days, when I'd stay out all night, unlike my girlfriend who would pout and resent me, my dog would be absolutely thrilled to see me. Glad I had made it back regardless of the time or duration of my absence. He was living in the moment, happy to be with his person. They aren't thinking about when you may leave again or where you were or what you were doing--you're here now, that's all that matters to them.

it's cliché but true: we cannot change the past nor can we predict the future; we can only control this tiny moment called the present.

It reminds me of how inmates, after a long stretch of not being able to shop at Commissary and then finally shopping, will spend the whole time simply complaining about the long wait, what they don't have, and odds of it happening again. Few ever just live in the moment of, Hey, I got to go to Store and at least pick up a few things and be happy about that. Sad, if you really think about it--we can't even seem to enjoy the good things that come our way.

But, like everything in life, there are exceptions to the rule. Here are a few tips on when we can use bad for good.

1. When trying to create a new habit or break an old one, try negative reinforcement (especially in situations where positive reinforcement hasn't worked). In a study of weightloss diets, diets that "punished" bad eating habits worked better than diets that tried to reward good behavior. Eat that cake and you have to clean out your refrigerator worked better at avoiding setbacks than if you don't eat that cake you can have a healthshake.

2. It is okay to fail. In many instances it has been proven to be a better teacher. One study showed that kids that failed a math problem and then were

taught the correct method outperformed those that had been taught the correct strategy upfront. I can relate. As an avid Scrabbler, if I challenge an opponent's word and lose, I never forget that word. In fact, I've often played games where all I do is challenge words I am unsure of as a training tool to learn new words.

So yeah, go ahead and fail, but then figure out what you did wrong and try again. Odds are you won't make the same mistake twice.

3. Pay attention to constructive criticism from people you trust. Relationships, as mentioned earlier, are better managed when we focus less on doing what we think others want and more on NOT doing what we know they don't. I am sure my girlfriend would have been a lot happier if I had simply stopped going out all the time than all the roses and fancy dinners.

Bio:

People can be like, Why should I listen to you - You're a convict, just like me? Truth is, I don't know. Don't. I am not going to say that I have it all figured out--here are my 20 advanced degrees. I just started writing about my problems and my issues as a way to deal with them and pass the monotony of prison. I began sharing some tips based on stuff I had read and researched and my own experience dealing with them. And people liked it and kept asking me to write more.

I admit, I'm less qualified than most self-help gurus on the market, but most of them haven't spent time in an American prison either. Furthermore, it doesn't mean what I have to say doesn't have value and can't help others.

My greatest strength is admitting when I am out of my depth. I am the fun uncle of life advice. I'm the good weather babysitter who is up for changing

the occasional diaper, but when that baby starts wailing, I am more than happy to hand it off to the experts.

I can either choose to be honest about what I don't know or delude myself into thinking I am some sort of expert-in-all-things. I swim in the shallow end of the problem's pool. I am softcore help. I'm the teen-first-real-job-lifeguard-at the community pool not the Navy Seal Combat Medic. Like, if you're feeling down or dealing with a difficult celly, I'm your guy. But, if you're seriously depressed dealing with voices in your head telling you to hurt yourself, Hey man, I'm not your guy. But I am going to give you the resources you need and point you in the direction to lead you, but then I have to get off the bus.

-h.C.

