

how to...  
look on the bright side

### Count your blessings

When we're bogged down with life's worries, it's easy to forget what we have to be grateful for. Says Pia Mugerud of Copia Coaching ([www.co-pia.com](http://www.co-pia.com)). "Gratitude is about choosing not to focus on what is missing from our lives but to be grateful for the abundance that's present – love, health, family, friends, work, the joys of nature and personal pursuits that bring us pleasure. When you shine the flashlight of awareness on what's right in your life, you have an entirely different emotional experience. Not only do you intellectually appreciate what you have, you also feel more grateful, positive, and happy. Cicero said 'gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.' The more you think of to be grateful for, the more you will find and the more you will understand the process."

This is familiar territory for me. A couple of years ago, in the doldrums as I was unhappy at work, I became quite unbearable to live with. My boyfriend, who had recently lost his mother, finally lost patience with me, telling me that I should be happy that all the people I loved were alive and well. At the time I was livid – "just because I haven't suffered a bereavement doesn't make my problems any less valid," I might have screamed. But he was quite right, and I remind myself of this whenever I start to feel sorry for myself.

Carole Warren, yoga teacher and lifestyle coach at Kamalaya in Koh Samui ([www.kamalaya.com](http://www.kamalaya.com)), has this practical advice on how to incorporate gratitude into our daily lives: "A simple practice at the start of each day is to find a quiet place, sit comfortably and close your eyes. Connect with your breath – the most precious gift – and from your heart sincerely give thanks for all you have in your life. Starting the day in this way sets an important vibration for the rest of the day."

### Don't jump to conclusions

"People often make assumptions about others' behaviour," says Alistair Lamont of Evans & Peck Organisational Development ([www.evanspeck.com](http://www.evanspeck.com)). "Next time you have decided the way someone is behaving is specifically being done to hurt or hinder you, give them the benefit of the doubt. If they then continue to demonstrate through their behaviour that they want to hurt or hinder, then react. Assumption is a dangerous thing – especially if it does not have strong foundation."

Don't I know it. I have what might be termed 'trust issues', having been subjected to lies and infidelity for longer than I like to remember. This manifests itself in the most tiresome ways, making my mind jump to the worst possible conclusions whenever, for example, my boyfriend is late home from work or mentions another woman's name in passing (I know, I know). He hasn't done anything to deserve this, and it is tedious in the extreme for both of us, but how do I stop? "Instead of coming up with only negative explanations for things, consider all possible hypotheses," says Angela Brassett-Harkett, psychologist and psychotherapist at Guy's Hospital in London ([www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk)). "Then rate them for how realistic each one is, based on an objective appraisal of the evidence, and try to think about the evidence you have against a negative thought or explanation."

"Think positive" as a mantra has somewhat been thrust down our throats in the last few decades. Oh yes, all that sunnyside up stuff is all very well, but life isn't always great and sometimes it's an awful lot easier to be cynical. I tend to veer madly from unbridled flower power optimism – "feel the love, man" – to deepest, darkest gloom, which probably has a scientific name and cannot be particularly healthy. But in general I would prefer the hippy to beat the cynic in my internal psychological battles. Clearly some people are more depressive naturally than others, which isn't necessarily to do with their circumstances – some of the most miserable curmudgeons I've met have been hugely wealthy, while others with ostensibly not such fun available to them manage to get by perfectly happily, thank you. So how I can unleash, once and for all, my inner Pollyanna, and banish the demons for good?

writer Lucy Lord



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## I'll scratch your back and you scratch mine

"Do unto others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:13) has always seemed to me a pretty good maxim by which to live your life. I'm not a saint by any means but I do go out of my way not to hurt people's feelings, and always make a point of passing on compliments. For the most part, people treat me with the same courtesy (though there are always unpleasant exceptions). "In the law of attraction, like attracts like," says Warren. "If we give out positive energy, then it is much more likely that others will respond with positive energy, rather than defensively. Remember, a smile costs nothing!" Brassett Harknett suggests we "learn how to look on the bright side by being around other people who seem to do this easily – observe them and ask them how they achieve it." She also advocates avoiding negative people. It's a fair point. Surely a cheerful, life-enhancing, glass-is-always-full type person is going to rub off on you more positively than a Moaning Minnie with a permanent axe to grind?

## Take care of yourself

Brassett-Harknett's tips for coping with stress include: tickle a baby (awww), walk in the rain, take a candle-lit bubble bath, look up at the stars, listen to a symphony, watch a ballet, curl up in bed with a book, buy yourself a flower, feed the birds and go on a picnic. People who surround themselves with beauty and give themselves (non-destructive) treats are far more likely to look on the bright side. I personally find a walk in the park never fails to cheer me up. A large glass of good wine helps too. Practically, making sure you get enough sleep, exercising regularly, eating right and taking up yoga or meditation are all going to help put you in a positive frame of mind.

## Be optimistic

Don't create self-fulfilling prophecies. If, for example, you go for a job interview convinced you're not going to get the job, you're likely to make less effort with your appearance, to put in less preparation, and – in short – scupper your own chances. Says Warren, "the mind and intention is an extremely powerful force. By focusing on the positive, this helps our emotions and reduces inner stress, resulting in a calmer and clearer approach to the situation. This energy is also channelled to attract the most positive outcome." What's more, research has shown that positive thinking is good for your health. Optimists have better immune systems and tend to live longer and happier lives, while, conversely, stress is one of today's biggest killers. So live longer by being happy and smiley – it's a win-win situation, really, isn't it?

## Alter your perspective

Brassett Harknett suggests we "develop an 'internal locus of control' for the good things that happen – for example, 'I passed the exam because I am intelligent and hardworking' and not 'I passed the exam because it was really easy – anyone would have passed'; and an 'external locus of control' for the bad things that happen – for example 'I did not pass the exam because the teacher was poor and our syllabus did not cover the questions set' and not 'I did not pass the exam because I am stupid.'" I think I could get to like this approach. Often people are much harsher on themselves than they would be to a friend in the same situation, so ask yourself what you would say to that friend, and big yourself up accordingly.

## Stop whingeing

A Complaint Free World ([www.acomplaintfreeworld.com](http://www.acomplaintfreeworld.com)) is a US-based organisation, which aims to reduce the daily griping and sniping in which most of us indulge. The idea is to wear a purple wrist band on one wrist and whenever you find yourself "complaining, criticising or gossiping" you switch the band to the other wrist, aiming for 21 consecutive complaint-free days. Says the blurb, "your thoughts create your world and your words indicate your thoughts. When you eliminate complaining from your life you will enjoy happier relationships, better health and greater prosperity."

Intrigued, I sent off for my wrist band. The organisation is non-profit-making and all proceeds go towards the manufacture of the bands. I consider myself fairly laid-back and happy-go-lucky (apart from the dreaded trust issues), but to start with I didn't even notice when I was griping, so entrenched was the habit. Worse still, all of my complaining was distinctly petty – with the exception of a heated argument with a friend about the Middle East, and I'm pretty sure my opinion isn't going to change anything there! But I don't think the idea is for us not to have opinions, just to be aware that it's pointless to constantly whinge about things over which you have no control. If something that's bothering you can be changed, change it; if not – well, that's life. I haven't made an entire complaint-free day yet, but consciously aiming not to moan has had the desired effect of making me feel fluffier, more chilled and more positive about life in general.

## Conclusion

So have I managed to silence my inner cynic? Is Pollyanna triumphing in all her smiley glory? I'm pleased to say that the advice not to make assumptions about other people's behaviour has proved very effective. "There's probably a valid reason for it" has replaced "what's the bastard up to?" in my internal lexicon. Likewise, the internal/external locus of control is great. I can be quite harsh on myself if I think I've failed in any way, so being a little more lenient and considering that external influences might be a factor has proved wonderfully liberating. Conversely, I've always been kind to myself in the sense of smelling the roses, curling up in bed with a good book – or, indeed, tickling babies – if ever the opportunity presents itself, but I do sporadically feel guilty about such self-indulgence. Now I just tell myself, in all honesty, that I'm probably prolonging my life. 🌱

