

How to Build a Smile

14 Ways to a Better You

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Introduction

Just have fun,” she said in a soft and raspy voice. “I always had fun, and it’s been a good life. And dance. I wish I could go back to those days when I was young and dance again.” She lay there, too weak to lift her head off the bed, and she smiled. She went on, “There is a lot bad in this world if you let it get to you. But you just have to smile and keep moving. Then you will realize it is not as bad as people make it out to be.”

It was her last day on Earth, and at 92 years old she had lived a full life. Her family surrounded her, and with fear and pain in their eyes they said goodbye to their beloved grandmother and mother. In her last hours she remained the rock her family saw her as, and she gracefully left this world.

Encounters such as this in the intensive care unit (ICU) are plentiful, and over the years I have witnessed many. They have taught me the power of words and the amazing strength of humanity. People like the dying woman above have reaffirmed for me the simplicity of what brings joy in life. It is not about what you have or where you have been. It is about how you feel and the strength of your attitude in every moment. How will you make other people feel? What will you have to say in your final hours when you look back at your life? How will *you* feel?

In time, I have realized that it is OK. It is OK for me to fail and feel embarrassed. It is OK that life is not always fair and that other people may not like me. I realized I am incredibly imperfect. I can finally appreciate that it is not about what may come, or the mistakes I made in the past. It is not about what could have been or

the uncertainty of the future. It is about what is happening right now. How can I make *now* better for myself and the people around me? How can I be the best version of myself in this moment? I knew little about the woman in the above story. I only knew the strength she showed in that moment. I only knew the pain felt by the loved ones she left behind.

Through time, I have learned that changing the way I perceive life events can in turn change the very world I live in. I had an awakening about the fragility and finite nature of life and the pure absurdity of complaining and dwelling in negativity or anger. It takes energy to be upset, but being content and happy fuels your soul and mind. I learned that it takes a combination of action and patience to conquer this ever-changing and harsh world . . . and then it will not seem so harsh. I learned these things through the passing of time,

my observation of others, my own failures, through education, and by surrounding myself with the right people.

Since discovering these new tactics, I have found it more difficult to sit on the sidelines when others are unhappy. Watching a loved one or one of my colleagues tussle with life's many challenges has always bothered me. I have always been tempted to pick people up when I see them in a state of need. Over time, I've come to the realization that on most occasions I have been extremely ineffective in helping. There are probably multiple reasons for this, but mostly that my jumbled mind is unsuccessful in verbalizing the important points that can make a difference. Writing has always been my preferred way to communicate, and in many ways this book is based on years of things I meant to say or tried to say, but was not quite eloquent enough to convey. It is

a combination of those tactics which I have learned and practice daily, and others which I am still mastering.

I grew up in a home where negativity and self-pity were not accepted, and I was heavily influenced by my father's inspirational nightly talks and never-ending words of advice. Even for me, his positivity can still be nauseating at times. But it was influential. He would often quote a slew of South Jersey and New England natives with funny nicknames who had a knack for simplifying the tribulations of life. Despite this upbringing, I often struggled to uphold these valuable teachings in the real world, and I settled for a lesser version of myself on so many occasions in life. I have come to realize that obtaining happiness and being positive is not just something you wake up and do every day because you want to; life is much more complicated than that. It takes time to master this,

and the result is imperfect in nature. But only you can control the outcome of your life and the emotional state of being you choose to navigate with.

Failures and challenges during my pursuit of medicine, capped off recently by the COVID-19 pandemic, inspired me to finally put to paper the tactics I have used the last 15 years to deal with adversity, stay positive, take control of my life, and keep smiling. This book is what I tried to say to so many people on so many occasions. Even as I wrote this book, I had to remind myself of the tactics I have learned through the years. I am a work in progress.

This book is not me telling anyone how to live their life and is not meant to judge others. I am not worthy of judging anyone. It is not meant to cure depression or anxiety and fix all your problems. No one smiles all the time. Happiness

and smiles hold value because they contrast with the times of frowns and unhappiness; they are all variations of the natural changes in mood we all have. Without a little rain, a sunny day will lose its luster.

This is a healthy mix of stories, parables, quotes, and evidence, constructed into advice based on my own experience and those of the people who have influenced me thus far in my life. If this book helps even one reader solve one problem in their life, or makes one person smile, I deem it a success.

Chapter 1: Through a Toddler's Eyes

“Your perspective will either become your prison or your passport.”

–Steven Furtick

In 1997, the movie *Life is Beautiful* was released. The film takes place in the darkest of human times, when the Nazi regime had a grip on most of Europe, entrenched in fear, racism, violence, and destruction. In this movie, the main character, Guido, goes to extraordinary and creative lengths to convince his toddler son Giosué that life under German rule is actually a complex game. He would get points for listening to his father and completing certain tasks, and lose points if he cried, complained he was hungry, or

missed his mother. Guido created an alternative universe for his child to help shield him from the horrors of death, anguish, and pain. Guido knew that if he could help alter his son's perception of reality, he could save him from a lifetime of pain. He could turn fear into fun, his anxiety into adrenaline. In the worst of times, he could give his son hope. He recognized the power of altering perception.

Can we live in an alternative world which is shielded from reality, like a toddler influenced by his father? No. But we can learn a lot from this movie. We can learn that there is power in perception and perspective. How we perceive the world determines everything. It is what makes reality a good day or a bad day. It is important to remember that reality is what you perceive it to be. Real life events do not exist in isolation. Instead, they only exist in the form in which they are

interpreted by each person. Therefore, each of us independently control reality, even if we do little to affect what is occurring.

How each of us chooses to view certain material things is a good example of differing perspective. For example, a pair of shoes a person sees as beautiful, someone else may see as downright ugly. But are they ugly or are they beautiful? Neither. They are shoes. They keep your feet warm and dry. You were fortunate enough to have the money to buy shoes. Some people have no shoes. In fact, nearly 1 billion people on earth (more than 10% of inhabitants) lack adequate footwear. Regardless of having the proper resources to afford shoes, some people are too sick to go outside and have a need for such material things. The shoes may be an odd color or not fit perfectly, but you are healthy enough to

need them and have the means to afford them. Are they still ugly?

Have you ever returned from a tropical vacation back to a colder climate and felt a deep, overwhelming chill when you walked out of the airport? You have a new expectation about how you *think* you should feel, influenced by your new perspective. For someone from Greenland or parts of Alaska, 45-50 degrees may be the nicest day in months, will drive people outside and into parks, and make them feel genuinely comfortable. But that same temperature in a traditionally hotter environment, like Florida, will be a different reality. People will complain it is way too cold. The parks and outside restaurants will be empty.

Same temperature. Same day. Different people. Different perspective. Different outcome. If you could see the weather through the eyes of both regional inhabitants, perhaps there would be

very few days when you were not happy with the temperature. Reminding yourself that the weather on a certain day is in fact “not so bad” is just a small example of how altering your perspective can lead to more satisfaction. This practice can be applied to larger and more impactful life events.

Our perspective, which is essentially our attitude or how we regard something, will strongly affect how we perceive things. How we perceive things in life will strongly affect our gratitude, appreciation, happiness, and overall mood. How we perceive the world is therefore a product of who we surround ourselves with, what we chose to prioritize and whether or not we have the capability to sift through the weeds of negativity that try to bring us down. Perception is always changing, differs between individuals, and is often a choice. Changing how you view the world changes the world.

Now that is power.

The Power of Perception

There are well-respected theories indicating that clinically depressed individuals have an altered perception of reality. In a recent study that examined abnormal time experiences in depression, individuals tended to report the domination of the past over the present and future. In addition, depression seemed to produce a subjective slowing of time in study participants.¹

This is an example of how someone's frame of mind and mood can powerfully affect their perception of reality. People believe that time is moving slower simply based on certain chemical imbalances in their brain (depression). It seems clear that how we interpret everyday events becomes strongly tied to our emotional state.

In addition to our state of mind, surrounding ourselves with positive environment will surely influence how we perceive the world. Let us look at another example. In two experiments published in *The Journal of Psychological Science*, researchers found that participants interpreted a neutral face as smiling more frequently when it was paired with an unseen positive image.

Using a technique called continuous flash suppression, the researchers were able to present stimuli to participants without them knowing it. In one experiment, 43 participants were shown a series of flashing images, which alternated between a pixelated image and a neutral face, presented to their dominant eye. At the same time, a low-contrast image of a smiling, scowling, or neutral face was presented to their non-dominant eye. Typically, this low-contrast image will be

suppressed by the stimulus presented to the dominant eye, and participants will not consciously see it.

At the end of each trial, participants were asked to choose which face matched the one they saw during the test from a set of five different faces. Remember that they only consciously saw a face with a neutral expression. Participants who were subconsciously shown a smiling face tended to pick other smiles as the best match.²

We see with this simple experiment that what and who we are exposed to in our personal environment, even if we are not aware of it, will influence our perception. Who and what you choose to surround yourself with can change everything. Surround yourself with positive energy, and you will perhaps view the world in the same light.

The Story of Two Dogs

As we strive to surround our self with positive energy, we must also appreciate the magnitude of our personal state of mind. There is a story they tell of two dogs. Both at separate times walk into the same room. One comes out wagging his tail, while the other comes out growling. A woman watching this goes into the room to see what could possibly make one dog so happy and the other so mad. To her surprise she finds a room filled with mirrors. The happy dog found a thousand happy dogs looking back at him, while the angry dog saw only angry dogs growling back at him. What you see in the world is a reflection of who you are. ³

While surrounding yourself with quality people and creating a positive environment is key to gaining a new perspective in life, there is no

more important influence than your own mind. It starts with you, and once you develop the ability to smile more often, appreciate the gifts in life, and express this, you will build the foundation for a new way to look at reality.

How Can We Change Our Ways?

So how can you change your perspective to give you a better appreciation of the world and your potential? This may seem impossible, since how we perceive the world is not only subjective, but also immensely complicated. Neither I nor anyone else can directly change how you view the world. However, through some simple changes, we can *indirectly* influence how we perceive reality. So where do we begin with attempting to alter our perception in a positive manner? Try the following

five tactics and you will likely see an improvement in how you view the world.

1. Surround Yourself with Others Who Have a Positive Attitude. The old saying, “Tell me who you walk with and I’ll tell you who you are,” has always influenced me. There are several ways to interpret this simple saying. Those individuals that you spend time with and are seen with in public will change the perception of who you are in the eyes of others. In addition, I have always interpreted it to emphasize that the people you surround yourself with will influence who you become and play a role in the decisions you make. Positive people will help reinforce the good in life and can be a constant reminder of your full potential. They will help show us how to act and how to better view the world. Like the subconscious images from the previously

mentioned study, they have the power to turn a neutral situation into something more positive, even if we are unaware.

2. Avoid Negative People. Impossible, right? On most days you will be forced to interact with people who are inherently negative. They will always attempt to bring you down. They will complain, share rumors about other people's failures, and tempt you to engage in their rhetoric. These negative individuals are trapped in a prison of discontent. They want desperately for you to join them in their jail cell. Their constant barrage of damaging behavior and verbal pandering make them feel entitled and powerful. But they are the very opposite. They are weak, and until they change their ways, they will remain in a state of emotional suffering. Resist and minimize your

time with these individuals. Life is too short to dwell in negativity.

3. Avoid or Minimize Negative Media Content. The constant dramatization and relentless reporting of unfortunate events will not only lead to anxiety and fear, but will subconsciously change the natural way you view the world. The studies available on the relationship between news exposure and effect generally support the notion that exposure to news reports changes our mood and state of mind, inherently affecting our perspective. More specifically, several experimental studies found a direct relationship between negative news exposure and negative emotional states. After being exposed to negative news reports, positive emotions decreased, whereas negative emotions, sadness, worry, and anxiety increased. Other studies have

found that news exposure can indirectly cause psychological distress and negative affect through an increase in stress levels and irrational beliefs or depression. ⁴

4. Be Grateful. By reflecting on what we already have in a positive manner and training our brains to do this regularly, we will maintain a much more positive mood, and this will inherently affect the way we perceive the world. Do this every day at some point. Be thankful for the people that surround you, for your career, and for the simple necessities like food, shelter, and running water. Most people on Earth are not guaranteed these basic things. Be thankful for the simple things in life—it will go a long way. Self-help author Melody Beattie said it best: “Gratitude turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos into order, confusion into

clarity. It makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.”

5. Challenge Yourself to Learn. Self-help books offer great tools for how to cope with challenging times and improve your outlook on life. The number of titles is endless, and every individual will have their preference. As you expand your mind you will develop the power to control perception more gracefully and effectively.

Building a smile starts with learning to change your perception and perspective.

Chapter 2: Feed the Right Wolf

“Self-pity is our worst enemy, and if we yield to it, we can never do anything wise in this world.”

–Helen Keller

There is a Native American parable which has been passed on for generations. It is the story of the two wolves.

An old Cherokee was teaching his grandson about life. “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy. “It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil: He is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.”

He continued, “The other is good: He is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you—and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win, Grandpa?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”⁵

Only WE have control of what emotions and feelings we let proliferate in our mind. Which wolf will you chose to feed?

Don't Be a Victim

Helen Keller could not see or hear. Sit and imagine that for a minute. I sometimes get

annoyed from a mild headache when reading too much or if my beer gets hot on the beach. I have witnessed adults turn into children and pout when their latte wasn't made correctly. Helen could not see, though she learned to read through touch. She could not hear, yet went on to influence millions, and eventually earn a bachelor's degree from Radcliffe College. She refused to be a victim when she had perhaps every right to play that role.⁶

Oprah Winfrey has become one of the most influential individuals in the world, and has amassed incredible wealth in the process. Oprah also had every reason to be a victim. An African American woman born into poverty, she famously wore potato sacks because they could not afford dresses. She was abused as a child. She became pregnant at age 14 and lost the child. But if Oprah had embraced the tempting role of being a victim, there would have been no award-winning talk

show, no OWN Media Network, no Harpo Films or *O Magazine*.⁷

Bad things will happen in life. Challenges and uncertainty are a part of any road forward. You may fail a class, lose a job, deal with a health issue, or struggle in a relationship. How we respond to tragedy and difficult situations is what will set us on the right path in life. One of the most devastating traits, and a common reaction to a difficult time, is the trap of falling into self-pity. The minute you accept your role as a victim, you have committed to being a victim, often for an extended period of time.

Once you think of yourself as a victim you will find excuses to maintain that status. “I have not received a promotion because my boss doesn't like me.” “I am overweight because I have poor genetics and no time for exercising.” “I can't find a life partner because I am not likable.” You can

easily find excuses to NOT succeed, NOT make good decisions, NOT take responsibility, and NOT to take a risk. These excuses will become more creative with time as you find different themes to attach to, building walls around yourself, and limiting any chance of escaping your current situation. Self-pity is the easy road, and a road traveled by many people, though rarely a trait of a leader or successful person. It is rarely a trait of genuinely happy individuals.

The Problem with Self-Pity

Self-pity does nothing more than perpetuate depression and self-destructive tendencies, and will prevent you from reaching your potential in life. A study published in *the Journal of Personality* found that with respect to personality, there was a strong association

between self-pity and neuroticism, in particular depression. In addition, individuals that scored high in self-pity traits also showed generalized externality beliefs, meaning they saw themselves as governed by circumstances beyond their control. ⁸

Life is chaotic, challenging, and oftentimes overwhelming. If you believe that you are the victim—thrown into the abyss with no control—you will let uncontrollable events and other people guide you. You will relinquish control of your life. Instead, change your perception when challenges arise. When things do not go your way, embrace the events as a time to learn and grow. Immediately put the events into perspective and recognize that things could always be worse. Take control of the situation and stay away from excuses.

American novelist John Gardner expressed these sentiments well, saying, “Self-pity is easily

the most destructive of the non-pharmaceutical narcotics; it is addictive, gives momentary pleasure and separates the victim from reality.” In the book *Tiny Beautiful Things*, Cheryl Strayed described feeling sorry for herself, saying, “Self-pity is a dead-end road. You make the choice to drive down it. It’s up to you to decide to stay parked there or to turn around and drive out.”

Recently, a friend of mine was venting to me about the challenges of filling out unemployment forms during the COVID pandemic. They described how complex the application was, how access was only available on limited days, and that the money was not ideal. They went on and on. In a matter of minutes, they had let everyone in the room know that they were the victim. The individual was complaining so we could all hear. Rather than expressing gratitude for a home, she complained. Rather than being

grateful for financial support, she focused on the frustration it caused. This family member is typically a positive and happy individual, but self-pity is tempting to us all.

On the contrary, I have seen great examples of appreciation and strength during this same period. I have had several COVID-19 patients on life support, some for as long as 21 days. During this time, family members were not permitted to see their loved ones. Imagine your loved one on the verge of death, and you cannot be present to support them. Yet in this difficult time, most families remained extremely thankful for just a daily five-minute phone call. They would thank our team endlessly and never complained. They accepted the circumstances and never fell into the trap of self-pity. They refused to make the tragedy of a pandemic about themselves. I believe this positive attitude is what enables humans to

endure, and should be practiced in both the best and worst of times.

Put an End to Self-Pity

Do you find yourself making excuses for being unhappy in your career or in your relationships? Do you spend a portion of your time with others complaining about problems in your life? Do you often feel like life has been unfair to you, and others just don't understand? Do you find yourself sometimes asking *why me?*

You are not alone if you said yes to any of these questions. It is a common defense mechanism for humans to victimize themselves to rationalize failure, feelings of discontent, and unhappiness. Let us look at ways we can help prevent self-pity from proliferating.

1. Stop Complaining to Other People. Whether it's a fender bender that resulted in financial hardship, having to work extra hours to accomplish a task in your career, or the weather that ruined your plans—As we voice our complaints out loud, we continue the slow, convincing process of becoming a victim. Occasional venting is healthy but becoming obsessed with expressing our discontent to others is counterproductive. Some people get enjoyment out of complaining because it gives them a sense of entitlement. It makes them feel powerful; even if just for a second. In reality, we give others the misconception that we are in fact weak, and can appear less likable. Philosopher Eckhart Tolle said, “When you complain, you make yourself a victim. Leave the situation, change the situation, or accept it. All else is madness.”

2. Verbalize Your Gratitude. When I work long stretches in the ICU, the nurses sometimes express empathy about my long hours. My response is always the same: “I am lucky to have a job, and I love my job.” The more I say those words, the more I convince myself they are true. More importantly, speaking my gratitude out loud helps prevent giving in to becoming a victim. The key is to verbalize your appreciation for what you have in life. Research supports the idea that grateful thinking can improve subjective wellbeing and mood. In the *Journal of Research and Personality*, published in 2008, two longitudinal studies found that gratitude led to higher levels of perceived social support and lower levels of stress and depression.⁹ In the words of motivational speaker Zig Ziglar, “Gratitude is the healthiest of all human emotions. The more you express gratitude

for what you have, the more likely you will have even more to express gratitude for.”

3. Don't Make Excuses, Make Different Choices. Benjamin Franklin eloquently and simply stated, “He that is good at making excuses is seldom good for anything else.”

My profession has allowed me the opportunity to meet people who work in many different roles. Often I hear the same employees complaining over and over again about why they do not like their boss or their daily tasks. They go on and on in bitter detail, week after week. Month after month. Year after year. They actively embrace their role as a victim—yet every day they make a choice to stay in that specific job. Every day they could choose a new employer or career, yet they choose to maintain their status as a victim. Rather than making a change, they choose to fester

in self-pity in an addicting fashion. “Everything in your life is a reflection of a choice you have made. If you want a different result, make a different choice.”¹⁰

4. Stop Blaming Others When Things Go Wrong; Try Blaming Yourself. When you take responsibility for your own part in events, you do several important things. You reinforce owning your decisions. You show strength in the eyes of others. You allow yourself to internally reflect, adjust, and make improvements. You also set yourself apart as a leader, someone willing to carry the trials and tribulations of others. Blaming others is easy, immature, and often ineffective. Blaming yourself is challenging, mature, and allows for control of a situation, rather than passing that control to someone else. Author Steve Goodier spoke of his decision to stop blaming,

saying, “An important decision I made was to resist playing the Blame Game. The day I realized that I am in charge of how I approach problems in my life, that things will turn out better or worse because of me and nobody else, that was the day I knew I would be a happier and healthier person. And that was the day I knew I could truly build a life that matters.” Take my and Steve’s advice: stop playing the blame game.

5. Stop Asking Why. *Why is this happening to me? Why doesn't he or she like me? Why don't I get paid enough?* When we continually ask these questions, we train our minds to practice self-pity subconsciously. Instead of asking why, we should rephrase these questions in our head: *How can I keep this from happening to me again? What can I do so he or she likes me more? How can I make more money?*

What are the next steps in righting my situation? What can I learn from this unfortunate situation?

Once you have eliminated excuses and the concept of being a victim, you will free yourself from the prison of mediocrity and despair. You will begin to find solutions to your problems rather than searching for another outlet to express your discontent. Solutions lead to progress, accomplishments, and happiness. People will quickly begin to view you as strong-willed and you will develop a natural ability to persevere.

Building a smile starts with the elimination of self-pity.

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