The Origins of Positive Thinking

The concept of positive thinking has long been a subject of discussion and has influenced countless lives. Throughout history, renowned authors and philosophers have emphasized the power of our thoughts in shaping our reality. In this blog, we explore the origins of positive thinking, the key figures involved, and the books that have helped shape this movement.

Epictetus: An Early Proponent of Positive Thinking

One of the earliest examples of positive thinking can be traced back to the first-century philosopher Epictetus, who stated, “The thing that upsets people is not so much what happens, but what they think about what happens.” This idea, that our thoughts impact our reality, laid the foundation for the positive thinking movement.

Happiness in the US Declaration of Independence

The United States Declaration of Independence, written in 1776, highlights happiness as an unalienable right: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

New Thought Movement: The Birth of Positive Thinking

The New Thought movement, emerging in the early 19th century United States, built upon ancient wisdom and philosophy from diverse origins such as Ancient Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Chinese, Taoist, Vedic, Hindu, and Buddhist cultures. As a spiritual movement, New Thought emphasizes the interaction between thought, belief, consciousness, and their effects on the human mind and beyond.

Often traced back to Phineas Quimby or Franz Mesmer, the contemporary movement consists of loosely allied religious denominations, authors, philosophers, and individuals who share beliefs in metaphysics, positive thinking, the law of attraction, healing, life force, creative visualization, and personal power. Phineas Quimby was an American clockmaker, inventor, and healer, who developed a system of mental healing known as “Quimby’s Method” or “Christian Science.” Franz Mesmer was a German physician and pioneer in the field of hypnotism, whose theories on animal magnetism influenced the development of modern hypnotic techniques.

Key tenets of the New Thought movement include the omnipresence and omnipotence of Infinite Intelligence (or God), the divine nature of human selfhood, the power of divinely attuned thought, the mental origin of disease, and the healing effect of right thinking.

Though not monolithic or doctrinaire, modern New Thought adherents generally share some core beliefs, including the divinity within each person and the importance of loving one another unconditionally. They believe that mental states manifest in daily living experiences, and that continuous revelation and new insights shape the evolution of New Thought. Critics argue that the movement’s focus on mental states as the cause and treatment of disease can lead to victim-blaming and detract from scientifically supported therapies.

Influential Authors in Positive Thinking

A number of authors contributed to the development of positive thinking through their essays, poems, and non-fiction writings:

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essays emphasized self-reliance and the importance of thoughts for individual progress. He believed that our perception of reality altered it.

2. Ernest Holmes, considered a founding figure of positive thinking, wrote about the power of the mind and the idea that “thoughts are things.” He also founded the ‘Science of Mind’ magazine, which is still published today.

3. Orison Swett Marden wrote books on positive thinking and founded ‘Success’ magazine, later renamed ‘Success Unlimited.’

4. William James, a philosopher and psychologist, declared that “man can alter his life simply by altering his attitude of mind.”

5. Emile Coue, a leader in self-help writing, encouraged patients to repeat the affirmation, “Every day in every way I am getting better and better.”

Modern Positive Thinking: The Great Depression and Beyond

The modern positive thinking movement is often attributed to two books published after the Great Depression in 1929: Dale Carnegie’s ‘How to Win Friends and Influence People’ and Napoleon Hill’s ‘Think and Grow Rich.’ Hill also contributed to Marden’s ‘Success’ magazine and interviewed 500 successful millionaires for his ‘Law of Success.’

Consolidation of Positive Thinking

The positive thinking movement continued to gain momentum with the following works:

1. Norman Vincent Peale’s ‘The Power of Positive Thinking’ (1952) offered a Christian perspective on positive thinking. Peale also founded the ‘Guideposts’ magazine.

2. Earl Nightingale’s ‘The Strangest Secret’ (1957), the first positive thinking audio recording, stated, “We become what we think about.”

3. Maxwell Maltz’s ‘Psycho-Cybernetics’ (1960) explained how the mind works and how to use positive thinking, offering

exercises to train the mind.

Positive Thinking Today

Positive thinking is now applied in various fields, including business, health, sports, education, psychology, motivation, self-image, and marketing. Numerous authors have expanded on the movement, with notable figures such as Joe Vitale, Anthony Robbins, Brian Tracy, Steven Covey, Robert Anthony, Louise Hay, and Wayne W. Dyer.

These influential authors have helped countless individuals tap into the power of positive thinking, inspiring them to transform their lives and achieve success. The legacy of the positive thinking movement continues to evolve and thrive in the 21st century, offering timeless wisdom and practical tools for personal growth and fulfilment.

Does positive thinking work?

My reading of the science evidence on positive thinking suggests to me that while it offers benefits it can sometimes go too far and be detrimental. Positive thinking is probably best used to help us counter too much pessimistic thinking, to help us focus our minds on what we want and to give us courage to do things that we otherwise might not feel confident enough to. It probably is also beneficial to our general health and wellbeing and in reducing stress. One challenge though, is as Humans we are complex and individual. What works for one, may not work for another. Positive thinking probably becomes detrimental when it makes us too biased in our thinking and not realistic. It could, for example, raise our expectations so much that we become insensitive to evidence that something is not working out, or if it backfires and you start to feel guilty or bad that you aren’t succeeding as much as you think you should be. Equally, some negative self-talk might be possible to counter with positive thinking (or even just noticing it), but it might also require that you try other

therapeutic techniques such as questioning your negative thoughts, or speaking to someone about them.