



“Better Not Look Down”

A recent study demonstrated that thought suppression damages the hippocampus of your brain, which processes short and long-term memory. (1) It is also been well-documented that when you try not to think of something, not only will you think about it more, there is a trampoline effect and you will think about it a *lot* more. (2) None of us like negative thoughts or emotions, so we naturally try to suppress them. Some of us may even shut the door so hard that we disassociate.

Positive thinking

That is exactly what I did my freshman year in high school. In the eighth grade, I was indescribably insecure, to the point that I was stuttering and could hardly talk without choreographing each sentence before I tried to speak. I decided I was done with my chaotic existence and created a new life for myself.

“When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”

“Forget about it.”

“I can deal with this.”

“What are you complaining about?”

These kinds of thoughts were what ran through my head from that day on. I worked hard to create my identity and, of course, had no idea that I was disconnecting from who I truly was. Instead of leaving the past behind, I was battling with it.



I became the ultimate positive thinker and felt that there was nothing that I couldn't accomplish. My “identity” was being cool under pressure. I was also nicknamed, “The Brick,” by a few people, which I took as somewhat of a perverse compliment. It wasn't.

This approach worked for about 20 years and seemingly brought me a lot of success. Until one day – suppressing my thoughts no longer helped. There is a huge mental and/or physical price to pay for that kind of thinking. It will inevitably make a person ill well before their time. I know from personal experience.

Positive substitution

One of the traits that emerged from that era was being hyper vigilant. I was analyzing every move I made compared to everyone else. I read every self-help book and was committed to improving myself in every way possible. I was open to therapy, tried meditation, studied Buddhism, attended workshops, etc.

It is fine and necessary to be aware of your past and understand how it might be playing out in the present, but then it is critical to move on. Many of us are intent on improving ourselves only by analyzing our flaws. We also try to “find ourselves” by deeply discussing the past and then try to fix our faults. This approach, when used alone, will not work. It is like placing your hand into a hornet’s nest. Your brain will follow familiar pathways, and the more you look backwards into your pain, the more you will continue to sink into those negative circuits.

Positive substitution is basic to neuroplastic reprogramming. It has been challenging for me to sort this out from positive thinking. You have to first understand where you are before you can move forward but doing battle with your past does not accomplish this. If you are in a surviving and fixing mode, you stagnate. However, creating a vision of where you want to go and taking steps to get there is a much different approach

I was able to pull out of my 15-year tailspin into chronic pain by using the basic writing and relaxing tools, getting better sleep, and dealing with deep anger issues. But I have struggled with the concept of positive substitution. Additionally, I lived in a medical culture that is demanding and tends to focus on what we have done wrong. I have been fortunate to encounter some wonderful mentors who have role-modeled a better way to think, and I am continuing to learn.

My tennis lesson

I was introduced to another level of positive substitution during a remarkable tennis lesson that I took from Mark Johns, owner of *The Tennis King*, in Great Neck, NY. Normally I would be focusing on my technique, analyzing every shot, and trying to make the next one better. Instead of working on the position of my follow through, body position, footwork, etc., he just had me focus on inhaling during his backswing and exhaling all the way through my swing. I struggled and I was not thrilled with him for the first half of the lesson.

During the second half of our lesson, it hit me how brilliant his approach was. My whole nervous system was focused on his every move, including the position of the racket. Instead of thinking of correcting the flaws on my last shot, I could anticipate the next shot; my body was unconsciously adjusting and the chances of executing the next shot were much higher. This is not to say that focusing on solely on technique is incorrect, but it allowed me to trust what I had and maximize it. The results were remarkable and without a single additional technical thought. I learned to accept that no two tennis shots are the same. Are there any aspects of life that are identical?



Vision of excellence

One of my best friends and mentors, David Elaimy, has been instrumental in teaching me to create a vision of excellence instead of driving myself with self-criticism. The process involves assessing where you are, along with your resources, and then deciding where you want to go and what are the steps to achieve that goal.

He is a remarkably enlightened person and has been coaching athletic performance principles for over 20 years. He coached my son, Nick, to 5th on the North American mogul ski circuit in 2007. Nick was poised to win the 2008 National Championship when he blew out his knee on a warm-up run. David was instrumental in coaching Nick's best friend, Holt, to the US Moguls championship in 2007.

While watching him work with these two, I realized the implications for my practice and engaged him as my surgical performance coach. He had a dramatic effect on my performance both in and out of the operating room. My complications decreased as my enjoyment increased. He has been coaching my spine fellows, who are residents taking extra training to better learn spine care. His input has resulted in the young surgeons to have a much lower complication rate than I had during my first five years of practice

University of Washington Women's Golf Team – 2016 National Champions

David Elaimy has also worked a volunteer coach for the University of Washington women's golf team. I have watched him coach the coaches, and also coach the players, for several years. He has had the same effect on them that he has had on me and my fellows. The team has been in contention for the National Championship the last couple of years. This year, (2016) they won it. There were many factors, but here are some of the core strategies:

He had the whole team use expressive writing and rip it up. It has been documented that simply writing down your thoughts, positive or negative, somehow breaks up the problems connected with thought suppression. The writing is the starting point, not the solution. It creates an awareness of what is.

Then, he worked with them throughout the season practicing active meditation while in competition. This exercise involves placing your attention on one sensation for a few seconds. In the midst of the cameras and crowds, he would have them listen to the sound of a bird singing. With active meditation you are shifting to another sensation beside your disruptive thoughts. We also use this tool during surgery by focusing on light touch when the situation is challenging.

Visualizing success and vision of excellence

Visualization is also an important tool in stimulating your brain to change and perform. It was a key aspect of Holt winning his National moguls' championship. He visualized every detail of his winning run while he was in the starting gate, and then connected to sounds and the feel of the snow. One of the U of W Huskies sunk a 60-yard clutch shot in the winning round. She had also used the practice of visualizing the ball going into the hole.

David's vision of excellence also included that the team was going to have the best time possible, whether they won or lost. They all committed to being the happiest first or second place team in the field and they stuck to it. Winning it all was a bonus.

Visualizing success improves the chances of making it happen. A vision of excellence that includes "failing" allows you to perform with freedom.

Put the hammer down

It doesn't make sense to live your life while thinking about the past or trying to compensate for it. Although understanding when programmed reactions come into play is important, it doesn't create a bright future.

I ran across this song, *Better Not Look Down*, by BB King that sums up this discussion, "*Don't look down or back. Just look up and put the hammer down.*"

It is your life and you have a choice about how you want to live. What is your vision of excellence and where are you placing your attention?

1. Hulbert JC, et al. Inducing amnesia through systemic suppression. *Nature Communications* (2016); 7:11003/ DOI: 10.1038.
2. Wegener DM, et al. Paradoxical effects of thought suppression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (1987); 53: 5-13.