

Thinking positively can be good for your body too, not just your brain

By Dr Radha Modgil (BBC Focus)

Studies have shown looking for positives in any given situation can improve everything from our immune systems to our heart health.

Positive thinking sometimes gets a bad reputation. Why? Well, because a lot of people think it is steeped in a denial of reality and can negatively impact our wellbeing as it does not allow us to process difficult emotions or feelings.

However, positive thinking is not about ignoring reality, but rather choosing to try and reframe and focus on potential solutions, being open to new ways of thinking, and finding something to be hopeful for. It can be a useful strategy for mentally and emotionally dealing with the many uncertainties and challenges of life. There is now a growing number of scientific studies that show positive thinking can benefit our physical health and wellbeing too.

Our ability to reframe and look for the positives in a situation appears to have benefits for many organ systems within our bodies. This known as 'cognitive reframing' and trains us to use techniques to challenge and change our perspective and views on a situation or experience. This doesn't just have benefits for how we feel or for our emotional wellbeing, but also has actual tangible and measurable scientific outcomes and organ-specific end points.

Our brains benefit from developing the habit of positive thinking. Researchers from Northwestern University in the States have discovered that individuals who have positive attitudes are less likely to experience memory decline as they get older. In part of a national study, the team monitored adults at certain time periods over a decade, each time surveying their mood in the previous 30 days and their memory recall. They concluded that having positive attitude was associated with a less steep decline in memory.

It is not just our brains that benefit from positive thinking but also our hearts and cardiovascular health. Another study, carried out at the University of Illinois, found that adults who were more optimistic were more likely to have better cardiovascular health and improved cholesterol and blood sugar levels. Whilst another study showed that having a positive attitude could reduce the risk of developing heart disease by 30 per cent.

The thinking behind this is based on the acute stress response that we experience when we have negative, fearful or pessimistic emotions. We have naturally evolved to release stress hormones like cortisol when we feel negative emotions and these chemicals raise our blood pressure and heart rate, causing damage if chronic and long term. It is not all bad news if you have got into a habit of negative thinking, though. We can learn and practise cognitive reframing by understanding our thinking patterns, noticing when they arise and challenging them.

Stress and low mood can also have an impact on the ability of our immune system to function at its optimum level. Researchers at Wisconsin University concluded that activation of certain brain regions associated with negative emotions appears to weaken people's immune response to the flu vaccine, in the level of antibodies present six months later.

So, science is beginning to add weight to the importance and impact of positive thinking on many of our different physiological systems, which all combine to add even more benefit to our health, resulting in positive thinking being studied in relation to increasing our lifespan.

Thinking positively about getting older and a constructive attitude to ageing has been shown to increase the chances of actually living longer too. A lot of our thinking is the result of habitual, repetitive processes.

We can start to improve our attitude to ageing by recognising that it is inevitable and so we are simply wasting our time by being negative about it, and instead focus this energy on the benefits of ageing, for example more life experience, discernment, and wisdom, and also by cultivating gratitude for a long life and a determination to remain as fit and healthy as we can.

How, you may ask? Is it just down to the choices we make which contribute to a healthier lifestyle because we are feeling more positive? Possibly, but there also may be a biological mechanism underlying this too. When we have negative beliefs about ageing, this causes us stress which in turn causes inflammation.

A study carried out at Yale School of Public Health found that a marker in the blood called C-reactive protein (CRP) increased in response to cumulative stress. The researchers concluded that positive self-perceptions of ageing and longer survival were partially mediated by CRP and therefore an inflammatory mechanism.

It appears that positive thinking and trying to reframe our thoughts with a positive mindset doesn't only mediate health benefits through us making 'better' healthier choices because we are feeling good and hopeful and motivated, but also because of actual biological mechanisms.

If we know something is harmful for us then we can train ourselves, through habit loop mechanisms in our brain of thought, action, reward. When we notice a negative thought, we can create space to then be able to step back and to see it as harmful but not judge it, and then take an active decision to choose a different and more positive thought instead.

Knowing this, maybe there is even more reason to try every single day, especially when we are faced with life challenges and uncertainties, to develop positive thinking strategies. This isn't going to happen overnight, and can be difficult sometimes to do, but ultimately it is a habit that we can develop and cement, that will serve us day in day out.