

# GOOD VIBES

*only*

WORDS: DAVID GODING

## *HOW MUCH POSITIVITY IS TOO MUCH?*

In the era of personal development, posting, liking and repeating positive statements is de rigueur. But certain types of affirmations can backfire, promoting contrary perspectives that undermine wellbeing. Consider this a personal development encyclopaedia.

TODAY  
I AM  
EXCITED  
ABOUT  
EVERYTHING





**B**lame the positive psychology movement spearheaded by Martin Seligman for the Pollyanna effect that sees adults pinning, 'gramming, wearing and even tattooing pithy sayings in a bid to believe them. The theory goes, as Buddha famously said, that what you think, you become.

And meditators and monks have been chanting mantras for millennia.

But the adage *acta non verba* – or actions, not words – runs parallel to a world populated by phrases such as *dream it, do it*. The relative ease with which they roll off the tongue, pen or keyboard is a clue to why affirmations are losing their footing. Naturally, the new year sees a collective affirmation frenzy whereby hopeful resolutionists seek to borrow the wisdom and resolve of spiritual, literary and business heroes.

"A new year brings a sense of optimism, and with it an opportunity to start again more successfully. It is an exciting time...for a while, anyway," says Blake Beattie, author of *Bullseye! – the Ultimate Guide to Achieving Your Goals*, and the founder of international Pay It Forward Day.

"Fast forward to the end of January. What has happened to the goals you set? Most people's goals have fallen by the wayside. Why? Because time just seems to speed by; other commitments and responsibilities get in the way and old routines and patterns surface, rendering the changes we wanted to make ineffective."

According to research published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, only eight per cent of people fulfil their new year's resolution; the rest of us mere mortals are destined to repeat the attempt next year, and the year after that. So should we just abandon the resolve to change? See it as a futile exercise doomed to make us feel worse rather than better? Should we just learn to be happy with our lot and cruise with the ebbs and flows that life presents us?

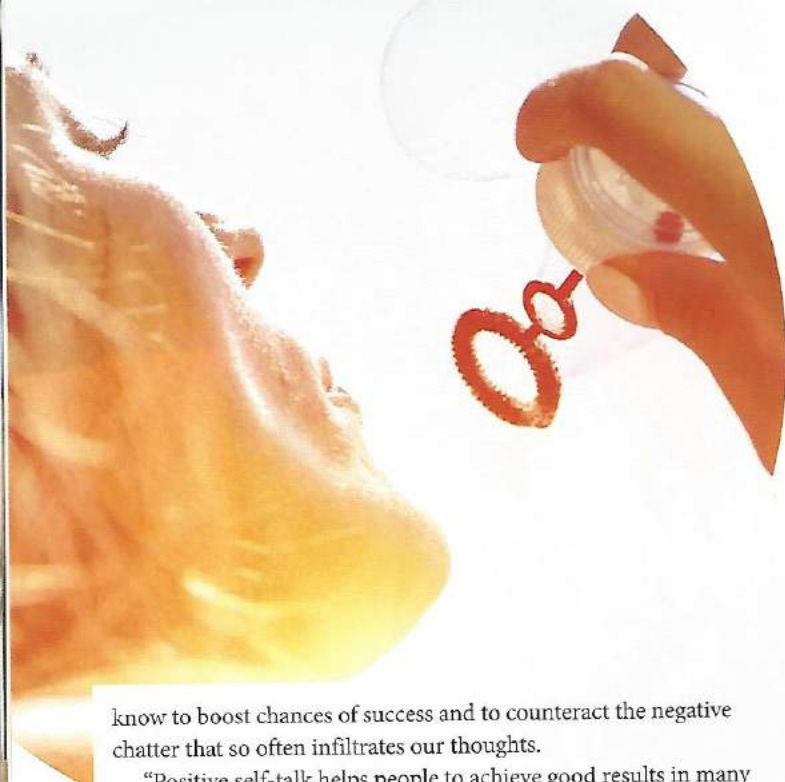
As attractive as this sounds, it's not ideal for most of us because we're actually designed to want change. Ambivalence doesn't come naturally.

"Whether you're aware of it or not, you are constantly working towards a goal of some kind," says Brian McAleer, life coach and author of *Setting Goals using The Smartest Method*. "Even if you don't have a conscious goal you're currently working on right now, you're heading towards something in life. Whether it is a certain financial status, your climb up to a professional level, some kind of a desired feeling about yourself or even a state of mind. You are being pulled towards something by what you value most."

If only you could tap into all that magic and get it working for you.

#### **WHY AFFIRMATIONS WORK**

Looking at yourself in the eye in front of the mirror (or looking inward to your mind's eye) and repeating positive affirmations is not a new concept. It's a psychological 'trick' that has been used by those in the



know to boost chances of success and to counteract the negative chatter that so often infiltrates our thoughts.

“Positive self-talk helps people to achieve good results in many areas, including completing simple and complex tasks, improving productivity, winning sporting events and boosting recovery and rehabilitation,” says psychologist Yuliya Richard.

“Individuals who can tell themselves, ‘Yes, it is really uncomfortable, but I can do it. It might be really hard and usually I run away from such situations but this time I will give it a go’, are more likely to take risks and overcome fears.”

Yes, positive affirmations work – when they’re well constructed – in more ways than one, says psychologist Lana Hall.

“Firstly, it means that you’re more likely to act in ways that bring you to your goal, because you’re regularly reminding yourself of its importance and so more likely to keep focused and motivated,” she says.

“Secondly, it helps you to be alert to opportunities that might help you reach your desired state. And lastly, affirmations can start to help you change your sense of self, your identity, to fit with your affirmation. This is a really key part of the change: believing that you are the type of person who can reach your goal. This is why a lot of resolutions end up failing: you say you’ll exercise regularly but you’re the kind of person who’s a bit suspicious of people who love to exercise. Your sense of self is threatened by your goal and so you don’t follow through.

“Tapping into your sense of identity is the scientific reason why affirmations are meant to be said in the present tense, as though you are already there.”

All these elements fit into what is known as the ‘confirmation bias’ – our tendency to look for information that fits with what we already believe.

“Every time you recite an affirmation, you’re confirming your belief, and so the affirmation makes it easier to see evidence that supports the affirmation, and harder to see the evidence against the affirmation,” says Hall.

## HOW TO SABOTAGE YOUR AFFIRMATION

Unfortunately, most of us are naturally very good at sabotaging our affirmations. We subconsciously construct complex negative affirmations, invent highly critical internal dialogue, and even perversely twist our positive affirmations into reversing the benefits that the initial affirmation intended. Ah, the wonders of the human brain.

“In psychological therapy we address the unhelpful self-talk that is often experienced by clients,” says Dr Richard. “For example, a client with anxiety might tell herself, ‘It’s awful – it’s going to be a disaster. It will be the end of me.’ Such self-talk might increase a person’s current anxiety and long term it can prevent the individual from taking risks to achieve positive goals.”

Creating an affirmation that is so remote from the truth – however desirable it may be – can also backfire on you in a big way.

“If you don’t at least partially believe an affirmation is true already, then it won’t help you,” says Hall. “In fact, if you don’t believe the affirmation at all (no matter how much you’d like to believe it), then repeating the affirmation will actually take you further from your goal. This is because when you repeat the affirmation, your mind responds by bringing up all the reasons the statement isn’t true. This is worse than if you’d never said the affirmation at all, because your mind will likely go on along its train of disconfirmation for much longer than you say the affirmation.

“Ultimately, any affirmation that you don’t really believe is true, or possible, will undermine your self-esteem, because it just reminds you of what you’re not. It will feel fake, like you’re lying to yourself.”

## WORKABLE RESOLUTIONS

Although most of us would say we want change, fewer are proficient at changing.

“Maybe you’ve been misguided to aim for something which doesn’t really connect with you,” says McAleer.

“Perhaps you feel obliged to live a certain way because it’s what you should be doing or it’s what society says.”

But delve a little deeper, tap into the excitement of an achievable goal, set yourself on a planned course to achieve it, and all of a sudden it all starts to appear possible.

Experts recommend setting goals in accordance with the SMART acronym – specific or simple, measurable and meaningful, achievable, relevant and reasonable and time monitored.

“Great examples of achievable goals are: In three months time I would like to have a set fitness and eating routine that I stick to,” says personal trainer Emma James. “In six months I would like to be able to complete 10 push-ups on my toes. In 12 months I would like to have reached my goal of dropping three dress sizes and feeling confident for summer.

“Once you have your short- and long-term goals in place, you then need to schedule in your training, meal preparation and eating around your already busy life. This could be done in a diary, spreadsheet, daily planner on the fridge, mobile phone app – whichever works best for you.

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"Once you have your plan in place, it's time to take action. Talk to the team at your local gym and ask them to set out a training program for you. Even better, allow a personal trainer to take control and help you along your journey."

There's nothing wrong with a big, grand goal, but you'll need to break it down into bite-size pieces in order to trick your mind into believing you can get there, and your body into actually being in the right place at the right time.

"Step-by-step each part of the process is a crucial element in achieving your goal," says McAleer. "It's like building a bridge that covers the gap you need to cross."

## WORKABLE AFFIRMATIONS

Posing in the mirror with duck lips and telling yourself you are sooo beautiful before hopping in the taxi on Saturday night is only one form of affirmation. Sure, it can work, though not necessarily for very long, but you're seriously limiting yourself if you think this is where the power of affirmations stop.

"When we affirm and focus on what truly inspires us and concentrate our affirmed thinking in the direction of our desired objects, we alter our internal world and as a result we view and act upon the external world differently," says Dr John Demartini, author of *The Values Factor: The Secret to Creating an Inspired and Fulfilling Life*.

"When creating your affirmations, don't use statements such as 'always' or 'never', use simple, powerful words joined into brief phrases, use words that carry feelings of gratitude, love, inspiration or enthusiasm, and use words you are willing to say for life.

"For example 'I am a master reader, whatever I read I retain', or 'I am a master of persistence and I do what it takes', or 'I do what I love and love what I do'."

Of course, affirmations can be transposed, refined, and perfected over a period of time as you find the most effective mantra. Life coach Alyce Pilgrim says the more engaged you are, the more beneficial the affirmation becomes.

"To give your affirmations more punch and make them more effective, get your whole body involved," she says. "Physiology makes up a large percentage of our psychology and how we feel. So if you are sitting down slumped telling yourself that you are abundant – shake things up a little. Stand up, put your shoulders back. Create a power pose that makes you feel confident and empowered. Say your affirmation out loud like you mean it."

## IMAGINING SUCCESS

Buddha's connection between thinking and becoming was prescient. Fast forward two thousand years and science confirms that adding a visual element to your affirmations serves as a 'rehearsal', creating a mental blueprint for your body and mind to follow.

"Research shows that your mind cannot distinguish between imagination and reality, which has proved particularly useful with elite athletes," says Hall. "When you imagine moving your arm, for example, the same parts of your brain are activated as when you

actually move your arm. Similarly, seeing yourself doing well at a task is like actually practising the task.

"Under certain conditions, mental rehearsal can be a very influential practice. We have all experienced this while watching a scary movie we're totally immersed in – your heart beats faster, you clench your muscles, as though the events are actually happening around you."

So how do you channel these imaginary powers for your own devious means?

"Make sure you make the images as real as possible – involve all your senses if you can," says Hall. "Visualise while relaxed and focused. See yourself completing the task as you would like to, in the first person – i.e. through your eyes, not as though watching yourself in a movie. And practise regularly."

Dr Lydia Ievleva, psychologist and author of *Imagine – Using Mental Imagery to Reach Your Full Potential*, says that visualisation is even more powerful than stand-alone affirmations. Put them together, however, and they're virtually unstoppable.

"The reach of mental imagery extends far beyond words, and is the major portal of your brain for transformation and quantum leaping," she says.

And over time, visualisation can even change the way you think.

"Neuroplasticity is the technical term for what is also referred to as cortical remapping, or brain remapping – the capacity of your nervous system to develop new neuronal connections," says Dr Ievleva. "Previously automatic patterns that are resistant to change can be switched off by creating newer and more adaptive patterns to override the old.

"This can only occur with mental practice that creates new neuronal pathways. Translated, this means you can rewrite your script. Whatever you imagine can become your new, more preferred repertoire to replace the old." ■

