

ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING

In a baseball tournament I played in, we went into the bottom of the 9th inning trailing 17-7.

We scored three runs before someone flied out to end the game at 17-10. As we walked off the field, our shortstop said, "You know what guys, we didn't lose. We just ran out of time!" This was an example of Reframing - looking at something from a different perspective to reduce stress. His comment didn't change the score. We still lost. But he gave us a bit of a lift, finding something positive to comment on. He also gave us a feeling of momentum for our next game. And he gave us a laugh - Reframing can be playful. People who see the world this way are more resilient and handle setbacks better than people who haven't yet learned the skill.

If you study "stress-hardy" people, one of their shining characteristics is the ability to think differently about situations. A famous example is the story of Tom Sawyer. Mark Twain's hero was given the job of whitewashing a picket fence, which he wanted no part of. To avoid this task, he enticed his friends to do it for him. His strategy was to reframe the activity as being fun rather than a chore. He got them so keen to participate that they actually paid him for the privilege. And while they worked, Tom relaxed under a tree. In this case the reframing was for others - but it cleverly demonstrated that we can look at the same things from different points of view.

There are certain questions that can help us to reframe situations:

"How else can I look at this?"

"How can I put this in a different perspective?"

"Are there any positives or benefits to this situation?"

"Is there anything I can learn from this?"

Sometimes it's easier to reframe things for other people. So a helpful question would be, "What would I tell a friend in a similar situation?"

When my children were small, we planned a Thanksgiving weekend with my sister and her family in Minneapolis. We were all looking forward to the trip when, at the last minute, one of the kids developed an ear infection and couldn't fly. We had to cancel and stay home. A mood of disappointment prevailed. My wife then said, "All right, there's nothing we can do about this. How can we reframe it?" My immediate thought was "That's easy - we just saved \$1,000." But we came up with other benefits, including taking in a play we would otherwise have missed. This story illustrates an important point: often we can't choose what happens, but we can always choose how we think about what happens. This is the essence of reframing.

In 1978 I developed pneumonia. When the diagnosis was made (complete with a chest x-ray that looked like a snowstorm) I was put on antibiotics and sent home for 10 days. I wasn't thrilled with the situation - but I quickly noticed an upside. There was a pile of books on my night table that I'd been itching to get at for months. This was the perfect opportunity - 10 days with nothing else to do but sleep and read. I decided the situation wasn't so bad after all. It had at least one redeeming feature - and that's what I chose to focus on.

Here's another example of reframing. A patient of mine had been working like a drayhorse for years at a very demanding job and finally reached a point of burnout. He had to be off work and go on medication. He said his leave-of-absence made him feel weak, that he couldn't handle the pressure. I said, "It's interesting that you say that, because I had exactly the opposite thought. What struck me was how strong you must have been to put up with that grueling schedule and

pressure for as long as you did. Most people would have wilted long ago. I think this demonstrates your strength, not weakness. There's only so much any of us can put up with before our bodies say, 'I don't want to do this anymore.' Your body is only now saying 'that's enough'." This made him feel much more comfortable. He replied with a phrase that told me the reframe was both credible and helpful: "Gee, I never thought of it that way."

So again we see that how you look at things influences how you feel. Negative thoughts drain you. Positive thoughts energize you. And you have a choice. So in any difficult situation, look for the positives and focus on the benefits.

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