

Happiness and Resilience in Difficult Times

A Presentation by

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Action 1: Be Aware of Your State of Mind and Emotions; and don't be a Victim

Recognizing your state of mind and emotion is a foundation for resilience and mastery of your circumstances.

There is a common pattern to emotional experience:

- 1) The objective information from the environment – what you see, or hear, or sense physically
- 2) The meaning that you make out of that objective information
- 3) The emotions that follow *from the meaning that you make*

The trick is to be aware of your emotional, physiological, and thinking state. That will allow you to have some choice in how you spend your emotional time.

Whenever you indulge in negative feelings, you are allowing yourself to be a victim to your emotions, or to somebody else.

Look at how you may fall into this in your personal life. Notice how often you blame someone else for your internal state: "You make me so angry!" "It's *your fault* that we're late!" "The alarm didn't go off!"

As much as possible, take responsibility for your internal state; you have much more to say about this than most people know.

Here are things that you can do to counter this impulse:

- 1) Be aware of your own state of mind and emotions. If you have a headache or other physical pain, or are tired and irritable, or are dealing with some stressful circumstances, you may be more easily upset or angered by somebody's words or actions. Take account of your own state, and responsibility for how you react from that state.
- 2) Be aware of the meaning that you make of your perceptions. Somebody may say something out of fun or ignorance that you take as an insult *because of how you interpret it*. Before you jump to anger or hurt, consider that you may be misunderstanding their intentions.
- 3) If you feel comfortable, and if it's appropriate, you can check out their intentions: "I was starting to take that as an insult, is that what you meant?"
- 4) Find ways that you can change your state of mind and emotions. Take a walk, find some humor, take a couple of deep breaths, stretch, get something to eat or drink, listen to some music, look out the window or go outside and focus your eyes in the distance.

MASTER YOUR STATES OF MIND

by Dr. Joel Wade

I talk a lot about finding ways to master and integrate your impulses, beliefs, knowledge, and emotions. But there is another dimension that I want to talk about today that may be necessary and invaluable to actually practicing this.

While each of us is who we are, and who we are has a consistency and identity over time, we are not in the same *state of mind* across situations. In Homer's *Odyssey*, this is something that Odysseus understood as he neared the island of the Sirens, and as we'll see he took measures to deal with the coming change in his state of mind. Let's see how you can do the same in your everyday life.

If you are relaxing you are in a different state of mind than if you are driving through traffic, or running a race. When you are with your mate and you're feeling lots of love and joy together, you're in a different state of mind than if you're having an argument or are feeling angry over something he or she's done.

If you can be aware that you move in and out of different states of mind, and prepare yourself for the predictable changes, this can give you great leverage for living well.

For example, if you are having an argument or feeling angry with your mate, that's a state of mind that will not easily lead to understanding and empathy. Sometimes the best thing you both can do is take a break and calm down, bringing both of you into a different state of mind.

Or you can actively shift your state of mind to one that is more playful and kind, and then try and talk it through. Staying in the angry state will not bring you to a better place.

If you are trying to lose some weight, you want to eat less, avoid foods with more sugar and fat, and get more exercise. When you're thinking about the benefits of losing weight and charting out a plan for diet and exercise, that state of mind makes it easy to imagine eating less, and exercising more.

But when you're in a social situation and everybody's having a dessert, or eating and drinking heartily, the atmosphere of fun and relaxation and the seduction of the yummy tastes and smells may put you in a *different* state of mind. And it can be hard to remember that *other* state of mind - the one where you could easily pass on the yummy treats.

A person can go in cycles from great resolve at one point in time, to ambivalence or indulgence in another, to guilt and regret over losing his or her resolve in still another. And this cycle can continue endlessly, causing anxiety, frustration, and disappointment, again and again.

So are you at the mercy of these different states of mind?

Well, in one respect, yes; such changes are a fact of life, and you and everybody else will enter and leave different states of mind often, as part of the natural flow of everyday life.

But you are also *not* at the mercy of them - *because you have a choice as to how you manage these different states of mind.*

Remember what Francis Bacon said: *Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed.* The first step to mastering these states is to know that they change. You are not in the same frame of mind all the time. This is why athletes get psyched up before a game - because they aren't psyched up all the time.

By acknowledging and accepting this, you can then begin to understand yourself as you move from one state of mind to another. By having a curiosity about this, you can begin to see how you behave in certain states, what the upsides and downsides of these different states of mind are, and what the consequences are for your overall functioning in life.

So let's see what this might look like:

You've decided to change your diet and begin an exercise program. You are focused right now on the benefits, and you are making your plans from this state of mind. Maybe you've read something or talked with somebody and this has inspired you (changed your state of mind).

But you know that there will be times when you will find it hard to keep this perspective. So right now, as you are making your plans, you can also take these other states of mind into consideration; because you *know* you will visit them at some point. You don't assume that you'll have this resolved state of mind always.

You know that there will be times when you will be more easily tempted by certain foods. So while you are *not* in that state of mind, you arrange some safeguards for yourself.

You remove from your home as many of the foods that most tempt you. You let your family and friends know what you're trying to do, and ask them to bug you if you go off your program. You keep a written log of what you eat, and the structure of doing that helps to remind you of your goals, of your commitment, *and of the state of mind you want to master.*

You do the same thing with exercise. You find a structure that supports you, that makes it easier to do the exercise than to not do the exercise. You find something you enjoy, with people that expect you to be there (and will give you a mildly hard time if you aren't), and you plan it into your day in a way that you can maintain consistently over time.

You make a non-reversible decision that will get you across your weakest threshold, the point where you are most likely to succumb to a state of mind that weakens your resolve.

For example, I love to swim, but I hate the moment of first getting in - just that brief moment of wet and cold. After I'm in, I'm happy. It's focusing on that one brief moment that can make me think of all the other important things I have to do, and any other rationalizations I can come up with to not swim.

Since I know this about myself, I make a non-reversible decision. I decide that, rain or shine, whether I feel like it or not, I'm getting in. This makes it easy for me to exercise, because I don't have to deal with the state of mind that allows me to hem and haw and debate the merits of getting in or not. I just get in. On to the next state.

When Odysseus and his crew were approaching the island of the Sirens, they all knew of the dangers. The voices of the Sirens would lure the crew of a ship to come close to them, where their ship would be smashed upon the rocks. Odysseus, clever fellow that he was, had all of his men put wax in their ears, so they could not hear the songs. But he wanted to hear them himself. So he had his men tie him securely to the mast, with strict orders not to untie him, no matter what.

The men steered the ship safely by the island, while Odysseus ordered and pleaded with them to set him loose. But by setting up the arrangement beforehand, with very strict and clear guidelines, Odysseus and his crew were able to avoid danger, even while Odysseus himself was able to hear the Siren's song.

Odysseus drew strength from his devotion to his wife, Penelope, his love for his son, Telemachus, and his bond with his land of Ithaca. This drew him onward, forward into his future, with a heroic sense of life. The tragedies along his journey all resulted from those times when he allowed his more indulgent states to rule his actions. His triumphs came from knowing himself, and directing his state of mind toward his goal of getting home.

What is your Siren's song? What states of mind get you into trouble, or throw you off your long term goals? Get to know what they are; what circumstances bring them on, and what potential good they may bring to your life - if you can master them rather than them mastering you. These are not simply bad states of mind to be eliminated, they are a part of who you are - but you have to know them, and learn how to help yourself deal with them. Including knowing how not to indulge them.

On the other hand, what states of mind bring you your greatest strength, your greatest joy, love, compassion, resilience, and perspective? Get to know what *they* are; what circumstances encourage or enhance them, and how you can spend more of your time in those states of mind.

Mastery doesn't come from simply eliminating or pushing away what conflicts with your goals. Mastery comes from understanding and developing expertise over all of the elements of a given task or field. Master your own states of mind, and you can master your life goals as well.

Action #2: De-catastrophize

1. What is the worst thing that could happen?
2. What is one thing you could do to make that less likely to happen?
3. What is the best thing that could happen?
4. What is one thing you could do to make that more likely to happen?
5. What is the most likely thing that could happen?
6. What is one thing you could do to prepare yourself to deal with that well?

OPTIMISTIC REALISM AND NEGATIVE FANTASIES

Written by Dr. Joel Wade

Today we are going to learn how to *de-catastrophize* your thinking.

Let's say you have a business meeting, and it doesn't go very well. There are some questions that you couldn't answer as you would have liked, one or two problems that you had not anticipated, and all in all you weren't at the top of your game.

Now what happens?

You might think to yourself: "That was awful, I'm so ashamed of myself, I handled the situation poorly, wasn't prepared, came across foolish, and I know the deal's not going to go through now. What's more, word will get out, nobody will want to do business with me, and I'll be out of work by tomorrow. Worse, I won't be able to find work ever again, I'll be out on the street, I'll lose

my family, my friends will shun me, and there will be nothing I can do to ever make any sort of life for myself.”

We'll call this the Doom and Gloom Scenario.

Or, you might think to yourself: “That was just super! Sure I've done better, but that's just because I'm used to such an exceptional standard that I know this customer was tremendously impressed. I'll get the call this afternoon that they want to double their order, and then the sky's the limit from there!”

We'll call this the Pollyanna Scenario. Do you notice that *neither* of these is very realistic? Yet people often tend to think that the pessimistic view is somehow more realistic than the wishful thinking of a Pollyanna.

Now let's look at the most likely scenario: “I was not at my best today. In fact I have some work to do to try and salvage this deal. I need to consider how it was that I was not as prepared as I should have been, and I need to think about how I can repair whatever bad impression I may have made. It may not be possible, and I may have lost this opportunity. If that's the case, I'll need to find a way to make up for it and regain a better reputation, if only with myself.”

Let's call this the *Optimistic Realism* Scenario. This is not some wishy-washy, middle of the road compromise between Doom-and-Gloom and Pollyanna; it is what is likely based on a realistic assessment of the situation.

You may have a tendency, when thinking about consequences, to expect the worst in situations. If that's the case, take a moment and think back to all of the situations in which you expected the worst. How many of them actually ended up that way? Probably not many, though maybe there have been a few.

Yet some of us spend an inordinate amount of time considering that the worst case may happen, with all of the anticipatory stress and anxiety that this causes.

It's worth considering that this is all in *anticipation* of something that has not yet happened, and is not very likely to happen either -- it is at this point only a fantasy, a *negative fantasy* -- and it is not reality. The stress and anxiety of anticipating the worst-case scenario, however, *is* real, and has negative consequences all on its own: greater likelihood of depression, pessimism, anxiety, and irritability, including negative physical consequences (people who are pessimistic over time have statistically poorer health and shorter life spans than people who are more optimistic).

So while you're busy worrying about some awful scenario that is not very likely, you are

practicing a skill - catastrophic thinking - whose negative consequences *are* very real.

Here's what you can do to begin to change this practice toward a healthier and more realistic direction.

If you find yourself worrying about what might happen from a given situation:

- 1) Identify the worst thing that could happen, and determine whether it is actually likely to happen
- 2) Think of one thing that you can do to help stop the worst thing from happening
- 3) Identify the best thing that could happen, and determine whether it is actually likely to happen
- 4) Think of one thing that you can do to help make the best thing happen.
- 5) Identify what is most likely to happen.
- 6) Think of what you can do to handle the most likely thing if it happens.

See if you can find one situation each day this week where you might be thinking the worst will happen. Take a few minutes with the above exercise, and see what happens. Make a note of it in a journal or notebook, and at the end of the week, have a look at what you have written.

This will give you a good idea of how doing this exercise can help you to grow a more hopeful *and realistic* expectation of things to come.

Learning how to practice Optimistic Realism and avoid Negative Fantasies are important skills in pursuing the virtue of happiness.

Action #3: Gratitude

Three Good Things:

Think of three good things that happened today. Write down what they were, and how they happened. Practice this toward the end of most every day, as a regular habit

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

Search for Gratitude:

Think back over the course of your life, and find those people and things you feel grateful for. Take your time. There may be people or other things there that you haven't thought about in years or even decades.

People:

Circumstances:

Opportunities:

Inherent strengths or gifts

Think of three things that you're grateful for today. Write them down in the space below.

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

Gratitude

Written by Dr. Joel Wade

You have a choice. You can feel disappointed in the world, envious of others who seem to have it better than you, and grumpy about what you don't have. Or, you can feel grateful for your precious life and the opportunities and blessings that you are able to enjoy.

When you take the time to feel gratitude for what life has brought you, you are focusing on the best of life, the best of the possible angles from which to view the events of your life. To do this is to take charge of -- and responsibility for -- your perspective.

Let me say that again: you have a choice about your perspective. Whether you look over the vistas of disappointment and hurt in your life, or view the landscape of blessings and gratitude, they probably happen to be laid out in just about the same place.

Psychology has often tended to encourage the former; focusing our attention on the failures of our parents, our culture, our humanity, in an attempt to heal the wounds inflicted upon us by these failures. This is not always a bad thing to do, as there may indeed be true injuries to be acknowledged, and wrongs to be addressed.

But much more important is to find ways of seeing and accepting the hand life has dealt you, to choose gratifying ways of approaching life, and to search for possibilities of creating good things in life from within whatever circumstances you may find yourself.

Emotions grow and multiply as you focus on them. Dwell on what's going bad, what you're angry or disappointed with, and you will get more of these feelings, not less. Focus upon what's going well, what you are grateful for, and you will give yourself the gift of more of these feelings.

Find some time each day to reflect on what you are grateful for. Some people do this by counting their blessings at the end of each day. Others make it a ritual in saying grace at dinnertime, each person in their turn saying what they are thankful for. Find a way that works for you.

You can also make it a point to thank the people with whom you interact each day. When you show your gratitude, people feel really, really good. They feel happy to have done whatever they had just done that you're grateful for; and more likely to be interested in doing so again. And you get to feel good too, because you're bringing your own awareness back to what you're grateful for, creating a cycle of benevolence.

Practice relentless benevolence, by taking every opportunity to feel grateful.

Action #4: Use Positive Emotions to Broaden and Build Resilience

Savor the Positive Experiences

When you're feeling good, when you're involved in something that gives you pleasure, *savor* those good feelings.

Don't analyze them. What you analyze changes, and you don't want to change the good feelings. Analyze the *negative* feelings and experiences. Savor the positive.

Aim for a 5:1 Ratio of Positive to Negative Emotions

If you're aiming for a 1:1 ratio, or a 2:1 ratio, you're aiming too low. People who report a high level of happiness personally, and people who report a high satisfaction in their marriage, report a 3:1 to 5:1 ratio of positive to negative experience.

If you have a 5:1 ratio as your goal, then it will jump out at you more strongly whenever you are about to introduce something hurtful or negative – because you'll know that you'll have to counter that with 5 equally strong positive actions.

Think about this with your business as well. If the atmosphere at your company has a high positive to negative ratio, this could help the success and strength of your business.

THREE TO ONE

Written by Joel F. Wade, Ph.D.

How much time do you spend having good, positive feelings, compared to the time you spend having negative feelings? How much time do you spend feeling things like joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love? Compared to the time you spend feeling things like bitterness, irritation, contempt, helplessness, pessimism, shame, fear, hatred, impatience, and dread?

If you think that your ratio is somewhere around an equal, 1:1 ratio of positive to negative feelings, you've got some work to do – you are probably depressed and unhappy.

If you think your ratio is around 2:1 – twice as much positive as negative feelings – you are probably getting along okay, like the majority of folks. But you probably wouldn't consider yourself particularly happy.

The tipping point, the ratio that [Barbara Fredrickson](#) and her colleagues have found leads to an upward spiral of positive feelings and experience, is 3:1 - *Three times as much positive as negative feelings*. (Actually, the precise number is 2.9013, but let's not nitpick).

Now you might be thinking, "Great. Thanks Joel, now I feel *really* bad. What use is it to know that I'm not feeling enough good feelings. I could have told you that. I know I don't feel as happy as I'd like. Now I know just how bad it is. What good is *that*?"

Good question.

Psychology is filled with diagnoses, labels that can be put on people that seems to tell you something about them, seems to explain something about them, but all it really does is put them in a tidy little box. Unless there is a way out of that box, unless a label leads you to some kind of action you can take, some kind of prescription that can help you to get to a better place, all those labels do is make you feel worse.

I'm not interested in making you feel worse. The good news is if you are living with a ratio of positive to negative feelings of below 3:1, there are lots and lots of things you can do to effectively raise yourself over the tipping point of 3:1, and into a happier way of life.

The first thing to consider is what you spend your time thinking about.

Do you spend a lot of time thinking about the people you love, the good things in your life, the precious miracle of your time here on earth, the opportunities you are blessed with, the things you like to do, the people you enjoy being with?

Or do you spend more time thinking about the bad people in the world? Do you ruminate about the missed opportunities, the tragedies and losses of your life? Do you allow yourself to feel helpless and pessimistic about things? Do you indulge in the kind of negative feelings I listed above, wallowing in all the bad you can find around you, spending lots of time with awful people, and dwelling on how disappointing people are to you?

Everything that I listed in the above two paragraphs is entirely within your control. It may not be easy to move from the negative to the positive; you may have a powerful momentum accumulated over many years of practice. It may be a slow and painful process to thaw your heart and warm your soul to a spirit of gratitude, hope, forgiveness, and optimism.

But you can do it. It is possible. *And it is absolutely worth it.*

The reason that I tell you about the 3:1 ratio, is that it can be easier to take action if you know what you're aiming for. If you thought that a 1:1 ratio was just fine, you might have been wondering why you weren't feeling very happy, given that your ratio was at about that level.

Now you know what you're aiming for. Now all there is to do is to move your ratio up to 3:1 or more.

The main thing I want to prescribe for you here is to move your intention from aiming toward a below 3:1 ratio, to aiming toward an above 3:1 ratio. When you start indulging in your feelings of contempt or annoyance or bitterness, remember and remind yourself that for every minute you spend doing that, you have to spend at least *three* minutes focusing on something positive.

This can help put things in perspective, because you can now see that ruminating and indulging in negative thoughts and feelings is not a neutral activity. Every minute you allow yourself to go there is a minute of loss. It's a minute that you are actively draining yourself of what's good in life.

Knowing this can help you to consider whether it's worth it to you to spend your time doing that.

I am not talking about perfection here. The ratio is not infinity:nothing. In fact, there may be an upper limit of about 11:1 where there is a lack of appropriate negativity, and behavior – however cheery – becomes rigid.

There is plenty to get angry about, to be annoyed at, to worry about, and to dread. You will feel bad, even depressed sometimes. I do, everyone does. Problems will find you. You will have arguments and conflict, disappointments and difficulties. You will have times of tragedy and overwhelming setbacks. Life is not all joy and goodness, and we seem to need a degree of this to keep resilient and growing.

But you have the choice of how much of your time you spend there. Think of indulging in negativity as going into debt with a credit card. Every moment you spend you have to pay back sometime, with very high – 300% in fact – interest. Use your volition, use your consciousness to catch yourself when you do this unnecessarily, and resolve to be more frugal in your negative indulgences.

All of this is within your own skin. But there's another tipping point for happy relationships, and that's even more eye opening. *The ratio for a successful, flourishing, happy relationship is about 5:1 positive to negative.* (From [John Gottman's](#) research)

Think about that the next time you go criticizing, nagging, or being hurtful in some other way to your mate – or your kids.

My wife and I, early on in our relationship, had friends – therapist friends as it happened – who as married couples would regularly swear and scream at each other, calling each other the most hurtful, cruel things - all in the name of “authenticity.” They thought they were being honest and enlightened by saying everything that crossed their minds, and unreservedly expressing their feelings.

But passing feelings are not truth, they are not wisdom, they are not sacred guides to living well. Feelings in and of themselves are just bits of information which may or may not be relevant or

important. And regularly indulging in your negative feelings and impulses with the people you love is a recipe for disaster.

Again, I am not talking about some fantasy world of pure goodness. You will have conflicts, you will have arguments, and you will have hard times. But you have the choice together in how you deal with these. Successful relationships are successful because of *how you deal with the conflicts*.

So now you have another ratio to keep in mind. For your marriage – and also with your kids, your friends, and the other people you care about in your life – the interest rate on your negativity credit card is 500%.

Think about that every time you go to say something hurtful or do something that undermines your relationship. There is a cost. Whenever I go to nag my kids, or scold them for some undesirable something or other, I keep this in mind. I have an internalized sense of what I want to encourage in my family, and it is a ratio at or above 5:1 of positive to negative.

(In business teams, according to [Marcial Losada](#) the ratio that describes high performance teams is 6:1. So the interest on negativity gets even steeper at work.)

The bottom line here is that I'd like to encourage you to actively raise your bottom line. There are many, many things you can do to accomplish this that I've written about in Mastering Happiness – pick an easy one and practice it regularly for a few months until it's become a habit.

But what's most important is to know what you're aiming for.

Action #5: Improve Your Relationships

Building good relationships leads to more resilience.

Stay connected with people whom you love and trust, and do what you can to make the most of your relationships. You will want people in your life that you can rely on, and who can rely on you. It's not just about getting your needs met, being the kind of person that others can rely upon is energizing and rewarding, and can help you to bring out strength that you would otherwise not have tapped into.

Avoid indulging in contempt for the ones you love. Only does harm, and makes everything more difficult if not impossible. You can't afford to lose those close to you.

Here are two actions to take:

Bids and Turning:

Whenever a loved one makes a bid for your attention, turn toward them. You don't have to jump up and do what they are asking of you – though that's nice when you can. What really matters is that you acknowledge the bid for attention; you turn *toward* them and respond right away to that bid.

Positive and Active responses

Whenever a loved one tells you about good news, or something he or she is excited about, respond:

- Positively – meaning with enthusiasm and good wishes.
- Actively – meaning that you ask questions and show interest.

TWO SIMPLE SECRETS TO A GREAT RELATIONSHIP

Written by Joel F. Wade, Ph.D.

There are two related things that you can do to make your relationships – not just your marriage, but all of your relationships – happier, stronger, and more fun.

These are very easy things to do - if you set your mind to it. I always recommend doing all the easy things you can do. Sometimes, because they seem so easy, people overlook them. But it's the easy, simple things that you do every day that make a relationship strong and happy.

When you have the kind of base that is built by countless friendly, kind, and playful interactions, then when the inevitable hard conflicts or misunderstandings come up, they are much less daunting, because they are exceptions to the overall spirit that you have created between you.

Bids and Turning

The first is what [John Gottman](#) calls "Bids and turning."

I've written about this before, but it's worth revisiting. When someone makes a bid for your attention, turn toward them – actually, physically, turn toward them; and respond to them.

Simple, right?

But here's where a lot of people get stuck. They think, "If I respond, then I have to do what they're asking, and I don't have the time or energy to do what they're asking, so I'd rather just try and ignore them, and then maybe they'll go away. Then I won't have to do what they're asking of me, and everything will be fine."

Except that, when you ignore them, and they go away, they take something with them: a little piece of the trust and joy and closeness that you both want in the relationship.

Let me clarify something that will make doing this much easier, and much more attractive.

When somebody – your mate, your child, a friend – makes a bid for your attention, turn toward them and acknowledge their request. *That's all you have to do to make a better relationship.*

You don't have to do what they're asking you to do.

Sure, it's nice if you can, and you want to do that as often as possible; but that's not the most important thing. *What's most important is the initial immediate response.*

For example, say your wife asks you if you could help her to do a chore, but you have work that you have to finish, and you can't reasonably take the time right now to help her – or you don't want to take the time right now, because you've got enough to do.

You turn toward her, and say something like, “I’d like to help, but I have to finish what I’m doing. I’ll be done in about an hour, and I’d be happy to help you then.” Or, “I’m sorry honey; I’ve got my hands full, and I really can’t help you now.”

Now, she may be disappointed, but she won’t feel ignored.

Make a point of practicing this for a couple of weeks. Notice when the people you care about ask for your attention. It may be obvious in some cases: “Hey, look at this!” Or it may be subtle: a gentle touch, or a gesture that you might easily ignore (if you’ve been practicing ignoring such things).

As you notice these, physically turn toward the person, and respond to them kindly.

And then if what they want your attention for is to show or tell you something they’re happy or excited about, here’s something else to do.

Active Positive Response

There’s another thing that you can do - from the work of [Shelly Gable](#) - that, especially for a romantic relationship, or with your kids, can literally make the difference between a happy, delightful relationship, and a pretty miserable one.

When your mate, or your child, comes to you with good news, *respond to them actively and positively.*

“Active” means that you ask them questions about it, engage them in conversation about it, and be curious about this great experience they’ve had.

“Positive” means that you are excited for them, happy for them, supportive of what they’ve accomplished, and optimistic and hopeful for the possibilities.

And *what matters is that you do both.*

Positive all by itself, without the active part, is actually not that much better than a negative response! If you say something like, “Oh, that’s great!” and then turn back to what you were doing, without asking anything or engaging about it further, you’re going to find that you’ve lost a great opportunity to build more joy and happiness into your relationship.

A lot of people might think that what really matters is how you respond to the negative things – the hurt, the fear, the pain, the sadness, the grief. But it turns out that’s not really all that important. Dealing with negative emotions, and helping people when they’re in need, is much more complicated. It’s not always experienced as purely a good thing.

I’m not suggesting that you stop empathizing with people you care about when it comes to issues of loss and sadness and fear, or that you avoid helping people. These are part of being loving and caring human beings. It’s just that this is not as important for the resilience, joy, and longevity of a relationship as how we deal with the good stuff.

When you respond badly to the good things, you severely undermine the joy and trust in a relationship. When you respond positively and actively, you create a benevolent cycle that energizes both you and the other person, and sets the stage for more and more positive emotions and attitudes between you.

It is this atmosphere of positive emotion, trust, and joy, that gives you the strength to weather, and even flourish through, the hard times.

Start at home, and expand out to the other people you care about. Turn toward the people you love, and respond actively and positively to any enthusiasm, optimism, and good news. Grow the positive emotions between you, and you will broaden and build your resilience and your joy, together.