

Broaden, Build and...Thrive!

by Joan King

How much time do you spend reacting to what happens around or to you?

How much time do you spend expressing who you are authentically?

In other words, do you live from the outside in or the inside out?

Most of us spend more time “reacting” than “expressing” ourselves. Is it possible to escape our automatic reactive pattern... to increase the scope of our actions... to increase our range of positive emotions?

Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson formulated her “broaden and build” theory to help us intentionally broaden our thinking and actions and build our resources. How different would our lives be if our actions reflected what we want in particular situations — if we expressed ourselves authentically, rather than simply reacting to external events? Besides increasing our exploration of our available inner and outer resources, positive thinking sparks our urge to play. Exploring and learning, we savor our past successes — in other words, we thrive!

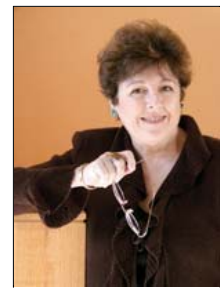
How we think shapes how we behave. If we can find ways to create more positive emotions, we will play more, explore more, and be more creative and flexible, according to Fredrickson and other researchers. Simply experiencing positive emotions, such as joy or happiness, interest or curiosity, contentment or serenity, and love, helps us eliminate our reactive, automatic, narrow, patterned responses and opens us up to new, creative and “often unscripted paths of thought and action.” Choosing to experience positive emotions increases our personal resources, from physical to intellectual to social. Increasing our experience of positive emotions, in turn, increases our well being.

How can we put this information to work to help us thrive? Let’s look at a hypothetical situation.

1. An event occurs. Our automatic response to this event is to become annoyed.
2. Engaging in thoughts about how much we are annoyed escalates the emotion from simply being annoyed to anger.
3. We imagine all the things we can do to express our anger, what we will say, to whom and how we will say it.
4. As we walk away from the situation, we feel frustrated and generally dissatisfied with our day, maybe our life.

This is an example of how negative emotions narrow our thought-action process. But another person in the same situation may choose a different response.

1. An event occurs. Their automatic response to this event is to become annoyed.
2. Knowing that engaging in thoughts about how much they are annoyed would likely escalate the emotion from simple annoyance to anger, they purposefully and deliberately choose a different response.
3. They consider that they don’t know what is going on in this person’s life. They can’t really judge them. What if a relative died recently, a loved one? Maybe they are so distraught they do not have the resources to consider how their actions might annoy someone.
4. As they walk away from the situation, they feel serene that they did not allow the event to automatically trigger a negative emotional response with the subsequent exhaustion. They appreciate the ability to live from their inner strength and walk away,



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content with their choice.

How much do you want to create a new life, one in which you thrive, flourish, prosper, succeed or bloom? If your answer is very much, consider doing the following:

- Notice when your automatic response to an event involves a negative emotion.
- STOP your automatic response from the normal progression that escalates the experience of a negative emotion.
- Choose creative, inventive, compassionate thoughts regarding the underlying dynamics of that particular situation.
- Allow the positive emotions elicited by these thoughts to arise and to guide your behavior.
- Assess this process to determine how it influences your personal well being.

If you regularly engage in this “broaden and build process,” you will find it easier to generate positive emotions. In turn, you will begin to experience the broadened intellectual and social capacities that Fredrickson speaks of. Soon you will notice a greater satisfaction with your life, greater creativity, more energy and generally greater well being. Finally, your worldview will begin to transform. You will become more optimistic and expect that you will thrive. Consider partnering with a significant other or good friend to engage in the process outlined above with you. By supporting each other, you gift each other with a greater capacity for a satisfying and meaningful life.

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