

Why bother?

We are often our own worst critics. This constant tendency to judge ourselves harshly can prevent us from enjoying life to the full. Switch on your I CAN mode to rekindle a sense of joy and optimism

Do you too often feel disheartened? Feelings of gloom can often descend without warning, depending on what's going on in our lives: from feeling like we're putting more into a relationship than we're getting out of it, to being undervalued at work. Sometimes things just seem to be conspiring against us.

I once worked with a talented and sensitive girl; one day she simply put her foot down and refused to go to school. As far as she was concerned, there was 'no point.' Or there was a brilliant carpenter I knew who had always been conscientious and eager to go the extra mile. But over time he became stuck behind a defensive barricade of cynicism towards life. Perhaps you have also thought at times: 'why bother?'

It doesn't have to be this way. The quicker we are able to break the cycle of these habitual negative emotions, the quicker we will be able to reconnect and rekindle our more natural sense of optimism, hope and fun.

Let's start by putting things into perspective. We have at least 40,000 thoughts per day and an estimated 70 per cent of those are negative. Our brains are inclined towards a 'negativity bias'. What does this mean?

Like all mammals, we are wired up to be prepared for the worst in order to secure our basic survival. However, in our modern world, when our worries are more likely to refer to money, jobs or our families (and not the imminent threat of an animal attack) this negative bias can become a destructive habit, rather than a life-saving one.

The flipside is that we are all capable of wonder, uplifting emotions and extraordinary states of mind that feed our curiosity and cultivate a sense of meaning.

So how do we flip that switch in our heads when we're stuck in a negative groove?

Switch on your 'I CAN' mode

Being in a negative state of mind can sap us of energy, and thereby our motivation. It puts us on a downward spiral that grinds our life to a halt.

The antidote is vitality and we can start tapping into that energy by using our imagination – our very own reality generator.

If we can internally connect with our own personal talents, resources and qualities (not things necessarily valued by others but those which give us meaning)

we'll instantly feel better with more of an 'I CAN' attitude to life.

To do this, first take time to remind yourself of your strengths and qualities; let the feelings that arise permeate through your consciousness. Perhaps you feel that you're a kind person; that you're courageous, maybe you value your wit or generosity – focus on these strengths and believe in them.

Next, think of an activity, role or relationship that brings you meaning and happiness. This could be as simple as reminding yourself of something you used to do, such as playing an instrument, team sports, painting. Remember and re-live times when you were able to show your best colours and feel how this ignites motivation in you. Motivation is the natural bridge to action; to stepping out and living your life more fully.

Meet your inner coach

If you dig a little deeper, beyond your immediate worries, you'll uncover one of the greatest and most hidden causes of your gloom and fatigue: your inner critic. That constant nagging voice that wears us down. That voice that indignantly says you're not beautiful enough, not clever enough and you have ideas above your station: 'who do you think you are?' it demands.

Learn to break that negative default setting by uncovering your inner coach or friend. It could be the voice of someone who has encouraged you in the past or perhaps find the voice of your own kindness and generosity that you offer to other people.

When the negative inner critic tries to take hold, call upon your inner friend or coach. Ask yourself: 'What would my encouraging inner mentor say now?' 'How would she make me feel?' Tap into that internal strength that is in each and every one of us.

All it takes is 10–15 seconds and you will notice an internal change. You'll find cracks appearing in that negative armour, allowing the light of positive thinking to infiltrate and improve your mood.

Cultivating an 'I CAN' approach to life and learning to listen to your inner coach, rather than giving in to the fears of your inner critic, will lead you towards a more upbeat and energetic life, full of vitality.

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PRACTICAL WAYS TO RECONNECT WITH YOUR OPTIMISTIC STREAK

Cultivating positive habits and practices are key to helping you reconnect with the joy of living.

Here are some ideas to set you on your way...

Take daily walks

Virginia Woolf would walk round London every day. Mingling with people and being curious would give her new ideas and refresh her thinking. Or, get out into nature – this beautiful, vast natural space helps to put things into perspective.

Make time for solitude

Take time to get better acquainted with yourself and the different voices within – your inner coach (as well as inner critic) – by finding a way to disconnect every day.

Seek out your friends

Connect with friends from the past who don't cross your path every day. Send them an email, give them a call for no other reason than to tell them you're thinking of them and want to know how they are. These small gestures generate a huge amount of pleasure and inspiration.

Create some order

Tidy something, anything at all, from a drawer, a file, a cupboard to a whole room. Go that extra mile and permanently de-clutter your home with the KonMari tidying method from *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* by Marie Kondo.

Make an 'artist's date'

In her bestselling classic, *The Artist's Way*, author Julia Cameron, recommends booking a weekly 'artist's date' – time set aside to go on an excursion for at least two hours. Do anything out of the ordinary – go to a paint shop, walk down the beach, collect leaves on a walk, attend a concert. This activity will help realign your perspective and ignite your creativity.

Talk to strangers

Be curious about and listen to people you don't know. Find opportunities to strike up little exchanges and conversations with strangers. Our social interactions can be very stagnant and predictable. Strangers invariably make you see the world in a different way.

Get stuck in and use your hands

Touch increases intelligence; it directly affects the autonomic nervous system and calms us down. Instantly transport yourself through pottery, cooking, gardening, sewing, drawing or playing an instrument...

