Inventory of Positive Psychology Interventions

Name of intervention: Sugar vs. Lemon

Source: Zone Positive* Tags: coping strategies, stress reduction

Short Description: Try reframing when you get frustrated or angry

Goal of this intervention:

This exercise encourages you to try a different approach when you get frustrated or angry. How many times have you been put on hold for (what seemed like) hours waiting for a utility provider (i.e. your phone company)? How many times have you waited in a line longer than you thought necessary—waiting for someone to serve you? Or, how often is the response not what you wanted to hear? For many of us, we have a short fuse when it comes to little annoyances. We easily fly off the handle at whoever is within earshot—which is often the service provider at the other end of the phone line. The question is... does your behavior or reaction make the situation any better? Do you get what you want in the end? And how do you feel for the rest of the day after your blood pressure has gone through the roof? How often have you ruined an afternoon using negative emotion to get what you wanted? Is it worth it?

There is, however, another way to deal with frustrating situations. It’s the “kill them with kindness” approach and it works nearly every time (and your blood pressure will remain stable as well!). If you think about it, if someone screams at you, what is your likely reaction? Either you’ll scream back (perhaps in a non work situation) or you’ll internalize some negative emotion which may not lead to a productive solution. If on the other hand you stay calm, act pleasantly toward the other person—even try to help, chances are the outcome will be smoother and more successful in the end.

How to conduct this intervention:

Try an experiment each day for one week to find out which works better—the sugar or lemon approach.

Step 1: You will on average be thwarted about twice a day. So for example, after fighting your way through the automated phone service and then being put on hold for twenty minutes, you finally reach a human being. At this juncture, I want you to FLIP A COIN. Heads, its sugar. Tails, its lemon.

If heads shows up, take the sweet approach. Slow down. The human being at the other end has also been listening to one dissatisfied and annoyed customer after another, each and every one just as frustrated as you. She’s probably demoralized. Here’s the sweetness part: cheer her up. Put her in a good mood. We know that people in good moods are much more helpful and altruistic than people in bad moods. See what kind of helpfulness follows.

If tails shows up, assume your typical behavior. Rant and rave-- blah blah blah

Step 2: Keep track of what happens--in writing--along three dimensions: 1) did you get what you wanted? 2) Did you make a friend, an enemy, or just get indifference? 3) How was your own mood in the hour that followed?

Questions to ponder:

- First, how many times did you get “heads” and how many times did you get “tails?
- How did you react when “heads” showed up? How was your behavior different? What reaction did you get/what was the outcome?
- Similarly, what did you notice about the “lemon” approach—were you more aware of your behavior?
- What happened to your mood after these events? Any difference between the two approaches?
- What has been your learning’s from this exercise?
Expected outcome

You will likely find that you got what you wanted either way, but when done with sugar, you make allies and your mood is better, and at the small cost of an extra minute or so for each encounter. Now try “sugar” for another week-- greet thwarting with sweetness and watch how people favorably respond to you.

Things to watch out for

There are two caveats to be aware of when you do “Sugar.”

First, some of the people you engage in the red tape battle are "on the clock." So they will be penalized if they take too long servicing you. You will easily sense this is so and in this case you need to be sweet but terse.

Second, are you being phony? This exercise will work better if you are being sincere, but even if not, you will still see a contrast with the reaction to your lemony self.

Is there any science to support this intervention

Several studies have looked at the impact of positive mood induction (i.e. when you go out of your way to be kind to your service provider!). A well-documented effect is that people who are put into a positive mood are considerably more willing to help others than are people who are in a neutral mood (Carlson, Charlin, & Miller, 1988). In general, the positive mood-helping relationship is strongest when giving help is pleasant and the help does not require sustained effort.

Additional comments:

Don’t be surprised if your “sugar” approach yields other positive outcomes: more favorable terms when negotiating a deal, faster more effective problem solving, closer relationships with friends and coworkers, reciprocal kindness etc.

Readings:


References:


Adapted from the “Honey vs. Vinegar” exercise, Martin E. P. Seligman Ph.D. - University of Pennsylvania