

When you can't change anything else – Change your perspective

Colleen Best, DVM PhD

Introduction

Our bodies and brains are hardwired to identify and react to the negative and threatening events that occur in our lives. Over the course of humanity, this has served us well, as those who didn't see danger, for instance a lion or a cliff, died. We now recognize this predisposition to see negative things as negativity bias, and while it served the human race well from an evolutionary standpoint, today, it presents a number of problems. Research has demonstrated that positive events occur more often than negative ones, however, because of the inherent negativity bias most people possess, we perceive that negative events occur more frequently and impact us more. This negativity bias keeps our brains on high alert most of the time. This constant state of alert or threat response causes a cascade of physiological events leading to sympathetic nervous system activation, which has instantaneous and long term affects, including elevated heart and respiratory rate, muscle tension, decreased executive functioning, and increased cortisol. These physiological responses are helpful if we are facing a physical threat, however, that is not often the case. Many of the threats we now perceive are those that relate to our sense of selves, our ability to meet our own needs, and our relationships with others. In order to best handle these threats, we need to be able to access the parts of our brain responsible for logical thought and problem solving. This occurs when the parasympathetic nervous system is dominant. We can grow our ability to control how we perceive threat, and to remain in touch with our executive functioning by changing our perspective.

Another valuable reason to address how to perceive the world is the degree to which we control our own happiness. Research suggests that our happiness is dictated by three components – 50% is due our DNA, 10% our circumstances, and 40% our intentional activities.¹ The good news is that at least 40%, and up to 50% is within our control! When we shift our perspective and outlook, we can change how we feel about what we are doing, thus facilitating our own experience of happiness.

Mindset

Carol Dweck is a psychologist who studies the power of people's beliefs. Her theory of traits states there are two ways people can view personal characteristics – with a fixed mindset or with a growth mindset.² Those with a fixed mindset hold a belief that basic qualities, such as intelligence or musical ability, are fixed and cannot be changed. People with a fixed mindset frequently believe that talent leads to success, not effort. Those with a growth mindset believe that the most basic qualities can be cultivated with hard work and dedication; brains and talent simply provide a foundation.² Dweck's research has shown that the mindset one possesses influences one's capacity for growth, willingness to try, and profoundly impacts how they see the world. This is an incredibly powerful finding, this finding applies to intelligence, social skills and more; when you believe that one can change, it provides diminishes the fear of trying. A fixed mindset makes one vulnerable to assaults on one's sense of self – for instance, if you consider yourself to be an excellent surgeon and hold a fixed mindset about surgical ability, a surgical complication or adverse outcome may be perceived as a threat to your sense of self, you're not as good as you thought. However, if you hold a growth mindset, a failure or unexpected outcome does not reflect back on your self-identity the same way, as you know that you can learn and do better going forward. The mindset one holds about malleability of personal characteristics impacts how one perceives another's actions and motivations.² Thus, if a growth

mindset is adopted, not only are you increasing your resilience, but also your compassion and positive attributions of those around you. It takes some purposeful intention to adopt a growth mindset, however, the benefits of doing so are multifaceted and abundant.

Gratitude

Practicing gratitude is another way to shift your perspective towards the positive – by devoting purposeful intention to positive things we begin to rewire the brain away from negativity bias, and towards positivity and balance. Ways to practice gratitude include: saying thank you, changing your internal dialogue (I get to vs. I have to), writing thank you cards, keeping a gratitude journal, having a team, family or group gratitude practice, and gratitude meditations. The benefits to practicing gratitude extend beyond ourselves. A popular children’s book, “How full is your bucket” by Rath and Reckmeyer³ by reminds us that when we do something kind for another, including expressing gratitude, both parties experience a boost. Not only is it important to ourselves to practice gratitude, it is also important for our interpersonal relationships to practice gratitude. Research by Gottman determined that the ratio of positive to negative experiences is 5:1 for a stable relationship.⁴ I think this can be extrapolated to non-romantic relationships and our daily experiences. When we begin to rewire our brains to see more positive things, we decrease the frequency that we perceive threat, thus allowing the parasympathetic nervous system to dominate. The benefits of this include enhanced problem-solving, creativity, and exploration.

Expectations

The expectations that we hold have the power to significantly influence our response to a given experience. To this end, it is critical that we devote some time and energy to ensuring that they are realistic and appropriate. Many of us in the veterinary profession have very high expectations of ourselves; and likely view these as a critical piece of our success. Expectations may provide helpful motivation in a number of situations. I think it’s important to consider the difference between an expectation and a goal. An expectation is a want or a need; it may be intrinsic, extrinsic or a combination of both. A goal has an outcome, similar to an expectation, but a well-set goal includes a plan for achieving it. This is a crucial difference. When we fail to meet our expectations of ourselves, often a deluge of negative emotion and negative self-talk follows; there is little room for compromise or a new approach. However, with a goal, the plan can be modified as necessary, and it’s possible to celebrate milestone successes along the way. Examining and understanding the expectations we hold for ourselves, and then considering if we can shift them to a more process-oriented goal, will support resilience and foster feelings of self-worth and success.

We also need to be aware that we hold expectations of others as well as ourselves. It has been said that “expectations are resentments waiting to happen” (Anne Lamont). This sentiment is particularly true when the other party is unaware of our expectations. her book, *Rising Strong*, Brene Brown advocates for believing that others are doing their best.⁵ She shares this quote from her partner, “All I know is that my life is better when I assume that people are doing their best. It keeps me out of judgment and lets me focus on what is, and now what should or could be”.⁵ This is a fascinating shift in perspective, it leads us away from blaming another and judging, to a more compassionate view of the other and their experience.

Conclusion

We have more power than we know to influence how we perceive the world. Often, we feel that things happen to us, that we are powerless in the face of our circumstances. However, we now know that we have the power to change our neuronal circuitry and change the lens through which we see the world. This was described to me once as being similar to grocery shopping, we all can choose which aisles we take our cart down, and what we pick off the shelves. It is worth taking the time to shift the way we perceive the world, it benefits ourselves and those around us.

References

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