The Power of Positivity

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We love seeing so many of you on campus and are looking forward to this new semester. We want to extend a special welcome to you freshmen who are joining us for the first time! We hope you have amazing experiences during your time at BYU. We want each of you to be successful in your studies as well as to develop a stronger relationship with and testimony of Jesus Christ.

There are many challenges and tough decisions associated with the beginning of a new semester. You may be feeling a whole range of emotions about all that you are facing. You might be nervous about your classes and hope your grades will get you a good job after graduation. You may be anxious about getting to know new roommates and negotiating who gets the best cupboard and the best shelf in the fridge. Maybe you are scared of receiving a new ward calling that seems made up—such as "ward participant." Perhaps you are trying to figure out how long to wait before getting married after a mission. Is one month too long? And last but not least, I'm sure most of you are looking for a way to avoid taking Statistics 121.

With all these emotions coming at you, it can be difficult to know how to approach this new semester with a positive attitude. But what if I told you that positive thinking might be part of the solution to dealing with the many stresses and challenges inherent in a new semester? In fact, researchers at Johns Hopkins University have found a strong link between positivity and our health, among other things:

People with a family history of heart disease who also had a positive outlook were one-third less likely to have a heart attack or other cardiovascular event within five to 25 years than those with a more negative outlook....

... [These same] researchers suspect that people who are more positive may be better protected against the inflammatory damage of stress. Another possibility is that hope and positivity help people make better health and life decisions and focus more on long-term goals....

Wendy W. Reese, wife of BYU president C. Shane Reese, delivered this devotional address on September 10, 2024.

... Additional studies have found that a positive attitude improves outcomes and life satisfaction across a spectrum of conditions—including traumatic brain injury, stroke and brain tumors.¹

The researchers suggest that smiling more, reframing stressful situations, and building resiliency can help "boost your bright side."²

In short, there is a huge amount of scientific evidence that suggests that health and stress are improved by positivity.

Today I would like to offer two suggestions for harnessing the power of positivity: (1) seeking for the good in our lives and (2) turning our hearts to God.

Seeking for the Good in Our Lives

The mere act of looking for the good in our lives is a positivity-producing action. It helps us put things into perspective and increases our ability to see the Lord's hand in our lives. Those who look for the good are also able to find blessings in their trials and feel the peace that comes from the Savior. As the Psalmist said:

O taste and see that the Lord is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him....

. . . But they that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing. $^{\rm 3}$

The more we actively seek for things that are good, the more good things we will find.

Think of a person in your life who has had a positive influence on you—someone who is always looking for the good. For me, that person is my mom. She is a pillar of positivity in my life. My mom seeks for the good in life, and she finds it! I saw her positivity radiate in one of the most difficult and dark times of her life.

In January 1994, while living in Provo, Shane and I arrived home one evening after attending the temple. When we walked into our tiny studio apartment—and by tiny, I mean tiny!—we noticed a message on our answering machine from my grandma informing us that my mom had a brain aneurism and was at LDS Hospital being prepped for emergency brain surgery. We immediately jumped in the car and drove to Salt Lake City. I cried all the way there while Shane drove as fast as he could.

When we arrived, we were met by my dad and two of my sisters. The mood was somber as we waited for the doctor to come talk to us. After a time, the doctor arrived and explained all the things that could go wrong related to the surgery. He then gave our family a few minutes for my dad and Shane to give my mom a blessing. As they wheeled her out on a gurney, she looked at us and said, "Don't worry about me, I'm going to be just fine."

We were shown to a waiting room, where we waited and waited and waited. It was a long night of waiting, crying, and praying. Early the next morning, the surgeon reported that the surgery had gone well, and he let us see Mom for a few minutes. We gathered around her bed and had a family prayer. Once again my mom said, "Now quit worrying about me. I'm going to be just fine. You just need to trust in the Lord."

Shortly after the surgery, the doctors did another scan of her brain and found that they hadn't quite gotten all of the aneurism and also discovered a second aneurism. The weeks ahead were difficult and filled with uncertainty, fear, and worry. Two more brain surgeries and many miracles later, my mom was doing well. Miraculously, the only side effect was a loss of smell.

Fast-forward to November 2022, when there was another aneurism and another brain surgery. In a journal entry from that day, I noted her amazingly positive response to this trial. I wrote that she said, "I'm not going to fear—I'm to be of good cheer! We just need to trust in the Lord."

I continued to write: "My mom's faith is unwavering! She is a rock. She is solid. She is positive all the time. She always finds the good in something when it would be so easy to fall into the trap of negativity."

I've noticed some things about my mom that seem to shape her ability to develop and maintain such a positive outlook, even in the most difficult situations. My mom is always cheerful. She always looks for the good in everything. She uses positive language. Here are some of her favorite sayings: "The Lord said to be of good cheer, so that's what we've got to do."

"We just need to trust in the Lord." "All we can do is pray." [And my favorite:] "Don't fret your gizzard."

With such a positive attitude, you might be wondering, "Does this mean her challenges weren't difficult or hard enough?"

No! They were extremely difficult, but she was able to find power in positive thinking, which has propelled her forward throughout her life and has kept her on the covenant path. Her positive attitude has had a tremendous impact on our family.

My mom is a reminder to me that we can be positive in good times and bad times. When we actively seek for things that are good, we will find more good things!

I love what Elder Mathias Held taught when he said:

When in health, cherish and be grateful for it every moment. When in sickness, seek to patiently learn from it and know that this can change again according to God's will. When in sorrow, trust that happiness is around the corner; we often just cannot see it yet. Consciously shift your focus and elevate your thoughts to the positive aspects of challenges, because they are undoubtedly always there too! Never forget to be grateful. Choose to believe. Choose to have faith in Jesus Christ. Choose to always trust God. Choose to "think celestial," as President Russell M. Nelson recently taught us!⁴

Turning Our Hearts to God

The second way we can develop the power of a positive attitude in our lives is by turning our hearts to God.

I love how this principle of turning our hearts to God is best taught by one of His anointed servants. President Gordon B. Hinckley was the epitome of positivity. I can't teach this principle any better than President Hinckley did at a BYU devotional fifty years ago:

My dear young friends, don't partake of the spirit of our times. Look for the good and build on it.... There

is so much of the sweet and the decent and the good to build on.

You are partakers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel means "good news." The message of the Lord is one of hope and salvation. The voice of the Lord is a voice of glad tidings. The work of the Lord is a work of glorious and certain reward. I do not suggest that you simply put on rose-colored glasses to make the world look rosy. I ask, rather, that you look above and beyond the negative, the critical, the cynical, the doubtful, to the positive. I carry with me a statement that I took from an article published some years ago on Commander William Robert Anderson, the man who took the submarine Nautilus under the North Pole from the waters of the Pacific to the waters of the Atlantic. In his wallet he carried a tattered card with these words: "I believe I am always divinely guided. I believe I will always take the right road. I believe God will always make a way where there is no way."...

Said the Lord in a dark and troubled hour to those he loved, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27). May the Lord bless you, each of you, with faith, with affection, with hope, with charity.⁵

I love that: "Let not your heart be troubled." God wants you and me to be happy. Elder Patrick Kearon taught:

*The intent of the Father's great plan of happiness is your happiness, right here, right now, and in the eternities. It is not to prevent your happiness and cause you instead worry and fear.*⁶

Jesus Christ is our advocate with the Father. He knows us personally and understands our challenges. If we turn our hearts to Him, He will strengthen us and give us courage to face hard things.

It is spiritually vital to have a strong relationship with the Savior. When we turn to Him, He will be a positive force in our lives. We can do this by making and keeping our covenants, praying daily, reading our scriptures, attending the temple regularly, looking for the miracles in our lives, and "thinking celestial,"⁷ as our prophet President Russell M. Nelson powerfully taught. So as you begin this semester full of all the accompanying emotions, I hope you will be intentional in seeking to be positive. Continually ask yourself: How has God blessed my life? What tender mercies have I seen or felt? When have I felt Him close by?

I pray that as you seek the good in life and turn your hearts to God, you will develop positivity and come closer to Jesus Christ.

I testify that God lives and that Jesus is the Christ. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

 "The Power of Positive Thinking," Health: Wellness and Prevention, Johns Hopkins Medicine, hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness -and-prevention/the-power-of-positive-thinking. 2. "The Power of Positive Thinking."

3. Psalm 34:8, 10.

4. Mathias Held, "Opposition in All Things," *Liahona*, May 2024; quoting Russell M. Nelson, "Think Celestial!" *Liahona*, November 2023.

5. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled," BYU devotional address, 29 October 1974; quoting from Christopher S. Wren, "If It's 3-to-1 Against Anderson: Can a Congressman Afford a Conscience?" *Look* 35, no. 8 (20 April 1971): 48. See also Hinckley, "The Lord Is at the Helm," BYU fireside address, 6 March 1994.

6. Patrick Kearon, "God's Intent Is to Bring You Home," *Liahona*, May 2024; emphasis in original.7. Nelson, "Think Celestial!"