

Lifestyle

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This weekend... Make 2014 your best year yet!

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Here's how to make 2014 your happiest and healthiest year ever.

According to research at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, those who **adopt an optimistic attitude** (<http://www.bodyandsoul.com.au/soul+happiness/wellbeing/10+steps+to+thinking+positive+,12909>) tend to live a longer life, have better relationships and are less likely to suffer from the common cold, develop cancer or die from **heart disease** (<http://www.bodyandsoul.com.au/soul+happiness/wellbeing/happiness+boosts+heart+health,7725>).

"Optimistic thinking has an advantage in pretty much every area in our life," says Dr Tim Sharp from The Happiness Institute. "As long as we understand what optimism actually is in a proper way," he notes.

To help you enjoy a happy and healthy year, Dr Sharp explains how to train your mind to adopt an optimistic outlook in five simple steps.

1. Banish negative thoughts

It's important to forget any self-sabotaging thoughts as these will obstruct you from accomplishing your

goals, says Dr Sharp.

To do this, follow his three-point plan:

- **1) Become aware of your thoughts:** Since many of us live on autopilot, Dr Sharp suggests taking time to stop and focus on your most important thoughts. "Ask yourself, 'What is going through my mind?' I recommend writing it down so it becomes tangible and forces you to clarify it," he says.
- **2) Are your thoughts harmful or helpful?** To decipher this, Dr Sharp suggests asking yourself: 'When I think this, how does it make me feel?' 'What impact does it have on my life?' 'Are they constructive?' If the answer is 'no', take the next step to create a more positive inner dialogue. Find your own affirmation: "If your thoughts are having a negative impact on your self, then it's time to find more constructive thoughts," Dr Sharp says.
- **3) He suggests asking yourself the question, 'What do I want to happen in this situation?'** Dr Sharp says this exercise is designed to open your mind up to new possibilities and positive action. "The ultimate goal is to find thoughts which help you accomplish what you want or need to do," he notes.

2. Make it happen

Next, close your eyes and visualise a positive year ahead. Dr Sharp says to silently ask yourself, 'If I could wake up tomorrow with a fantastic life, what would it look like?' 'What would I be doing that I'm not doing now?' Dr Sharp suggests writing your thoughts down in a diary, or making a vision board as something to work towards.

Once you have a clear positive picture in your mind, the next step is recognising your goals and breaking them down into achievable steps. "Slowly break [them] down from 12 to six months, then three to one month, and then week by week," Dr Sharp says.

"Ideally, you want a daily to-do list. If you know what you need to do today, tomorrow, and next week to achieve your goal, it will add up and ultimately you'll have a great year."

3. Don't go overboard

If setting goals in previous years has led to disappointment, Dr Sharp recommends making smaller more achievable objectives for greater results. "Focus on the most important thing you could do to make a positive impact on your life over the next 12 months," he says. "Sometimes if we can make just one positive change – whether it be giving up smoking or exercising more – it can be the catalyst that kick-starts a string of other positive changes."

4. Focus on what you're good at

Rather than writing a long list of things you want to change, Dr Sharp suggests focussing on building your strengths, over trying to fix your weaknesses. "We tend to get a much better return on our investment if we work with what we are already good at," he says, suggesting asking yourself, 'What am I best at?' 'What energises me?' 'What inner attributes do I have and how can I use them more?' "When you focus on intensifying your strengths, you will typically perform better and have a deeper sense of satisfaction," he says.

5. Self reflection and gratitude

Finally, Dr Sharp says the best way to infuse happiness into your new year is to be grateful for all the good things in your life and focus on what you have and less on what you don't have.

PLUS: You're only 10 weeks away from a brand new you in 2014. Update your health and fitness regime

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