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THE POWER

OF CHANGING YOUR MIND

By Laurie Gardner

We've all heard the expressions about the importance of attitude: "Check yourself before you wreck yourself" . . . "Mind over matter" . . . "A smile is an inexpensive way to improve your looks" . . . But is attitude adjustment really possible? If so, does it last?

Recent brain research shows that we can literally rewire our brains by choosing to view things in a more positive way. When we react to external situations by focusing on what's wrong, we trigger a negative emotional response, like anger, frustration, self-pity, or blame. If we instead choose a sunnier interpretation, we not only feel better in the moment, but we also create new neural pathways that help us to react more positively in the future.

Last week, I had a chance to practice this skill when I dropped a full pitcher of water by my fridge. In the past, my first reaction would have been, "Oh man, I don't feel like dealing with this right now!" Instead, I just mopped it up and laughed, "Well, that's one way to clean the floor."

Meanwhile, for those of us who are used to making things happen, trying to stay positive can be very difficult when we're not in control. I find this to be especially true when I experience an unpleasant or unexpected life change or when I'm waiting to hear back about something important.

A couple of suggestions from my "How to Be Happy Even When Life is Crappy: 32 Tips & Quips to Get You There":

- Think like a Spaniard. In Spanish, the word *esperar* means both to wait and to hope. Instead of clinging to specific outcomes and timing, have faith in "this or something better."
- Correction, not rejection. When things don't work out, it's just not where you belong.

When I was a teenager, I used to watch my older sister get ready to go out. One evening, she had a fight with her boyfriend and slammed down the phone. Without another word, she put on a stylish outfit, smiled at herself in the mirror, then strutted out of the room. She turned around and winked, "It's all in the 'tude."

Attitude. If I'd only known then how important it is.

Recently, I presented a seminar in Longboat Key. While we were talking about the power of positive thinking, a woman in the audience raised her hand and asked, "But how is it possible when really bad things happen in our lives? It just doesn't seem realistic in more challenging circumstances."



I told her about my favorite aunt. After working for twenty-five years in a stressful, high-powered law firm, Brenda had just retired and was looking forward to some well-deserved vacation and leisure. Two weeks later, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. I visited her in New York when she was in the throes of radiation and chemo, going through continuous rounds of brutal, draining treatments that would knock anyone down in the dumps. Instead, the whole time we were together, she laughed and joked, happier than I'd ever seen her. When I asked her how she could possibly be so cheerful given all that she was going through, she said, "Laurie, I could go any day now. And I sure as heck am not going out in a bad mood."

Ten years later, while her doctors use the word "remission," Brenda triumphantly tells people that she "survived." In my opinion, she more than survived. She's a shining example of how changing your attitude changes your life.

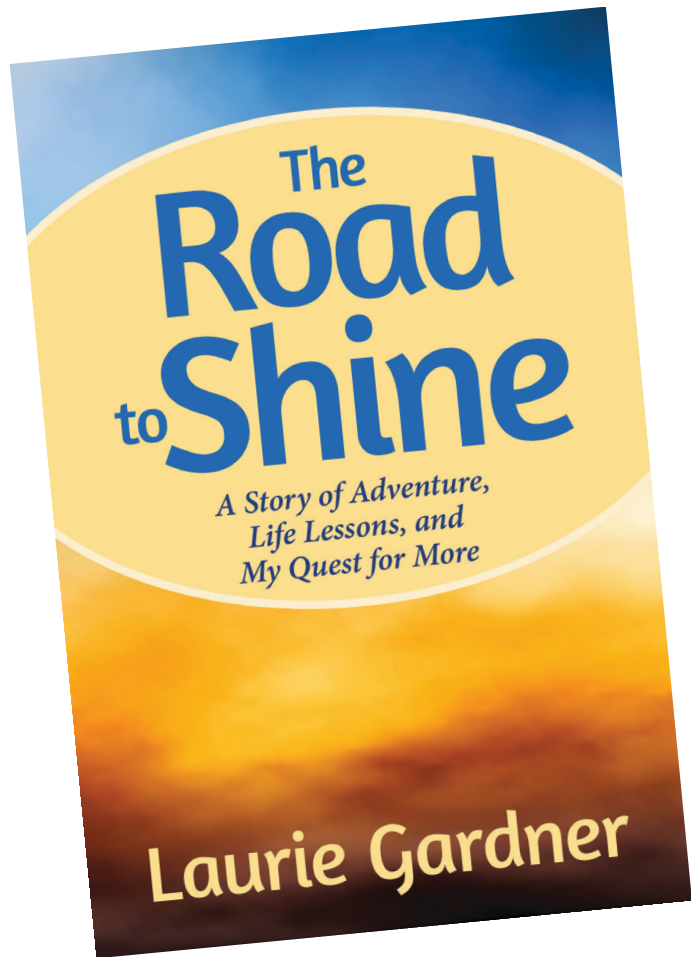
One last story from my new book, *The Road to Shine*. Navigating through fifty countries and forty states, extreme wilderness adventures, and life's normal ups and downs, I learned again and again the power of adjusting my attitude. My biggest a-ha occurred in Italy:

"Che brutto giorno!" ("What an ugly day!") exclaimed the hotel maid, dragging on her cigarette as she looked out at the pouring rain.

Rosario and I disagreed. Laughing as we splashed through the puddles, we jumped from doorstep to doorstep, stopping to embrace and kiss under each dry alcove. We arrived at his car, cranked up the stereo, and danced and sang while the storm crashed all around us.

An ugly day? Not at all. That was one of the best days I'd had in a while.





Ever since we met, I was struck by how happy Rosario is. Rowing a boat across the beautiful turquoise bay, he told me how much he enjoyed his job, appreciated his family, and loved living by the sea. He could view his life differently: "I'm almost thirty and still single, and my job takes me away from family and friends." Instead, he sighed contentedly, "Il mio cuore è veramente pieno di gioia." ("My heart is truly full of joy.")

At first, I thought he might just be simple-minded: How could someone be so upbeat all the time? But as I got to know him, I realized that his happiness is genuine. He lives fully in each moment, appreciates the simple things in life (as well as the complex), and often bursts into spontaneous play.

In one week, I learned more about true joy from this young Sicilian than I had in my entire life so far. The guy has simply decided his time on this planet is going to be fun. He's not naïve to the struggles around him, nor free from struggle himself. He just chooses to approach life with a positive attitude.

Somehow, we've convinced ourselves that joy is something we have to spend a lifetime working toward. But even by diligently chipping away at our negative habits and thoughts, we might never get a piece of that all-elusive happiness.

What if it's a lot simpler than that? What if it's a lot more fun? What if, like Rosario, we decide that happiness is possible right now?

Horrible rainstorm or private dance party? It's our decision.

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