

Train of Thought

If Christopher Reeve and Napoleon Dynamite can do it...

By Alex Pattakos, Ph.D.

Reworking the way we think can affect the way we act, and ultimately change our lives. Dr. Pattakos provides some tips on dealing with the challenges of life.

He was known all over the world for his leading role in "Superman," the movie that made him a star. At the age of 42, Christopher Reeve's acting career was golden and his life was filled with unlimited possibilities. An all-around athlete, Reeve loved sailing and was a skilled equestrian, skier, ice skater, and tennis player. But one day in 1995, he was thrown from his horse in an accident that broke his neck and left him paralyzed. The man who was better known as Superman became a quadriplegic.

After the initial shock and adjustment to his new situation, Reeve decided to do something positive. He decided not only to fight for his own health and recovery, but for thousands of other people also suffering from spinal cord injuries. Reeve displayed his positive attitude on the *Larry King Live* television show; just 10 months after his accident he stated, "I am a very lucky guy." "I can testify before Congress. I can raise funds. I can raise awareness." Wow! I think you'll agree that to consider yourself a "lucky guy" after such an accident is quite remarkable!

There are not many of us who are thrown into this kind of tragic situation during our lifetime. But all of us do face, over the course of our lives, challenging situations that test both our personal attitude and will. Although our own circumstances may be different, in scale to those faced by Christopher Reeve, we all, I'm sure, can recall times when we wished we had the strength of Superman.

Although we can't always control what happens to us in life, believe it or not, we do always possess the *freedom* and *power* to choose how we respond to the situation. And while we don't always have the freedom to do whatever we want, we do have the ultimate freedom to choose a positive attitude toward whatever is happening in our lives.



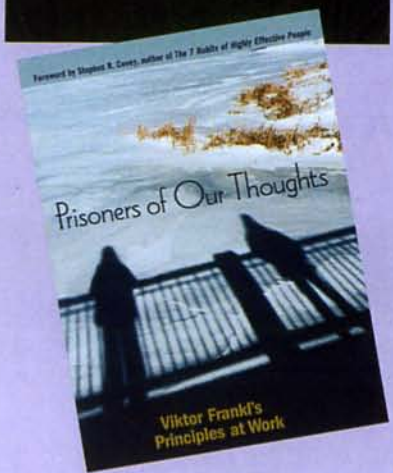
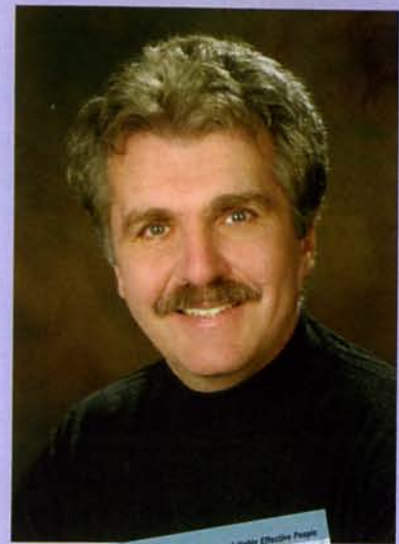
Here's a quick trick I use when faced with a stressful or difficult situation. Think of a time at school or in your personal life that is or was especially stressful, negative, or challenging for you. Now, take a deep breath, and write down *ten positive things* that could result or did result from this situation. Notice any resistance you may have in doing this. Write down what first comes to mind. Continue to stretch your imagination, by listing whatever comes to mind, no matter how silly, far out, or unrealistic your thoughts may seem to wonder. Sometimes, of course, looking for the positive in situations, especially those that involve hardship and suffering, is much easier said than done. This is because we have to first let go of our frustrations, anger, and perhaps disappointments.


Personally, I like to learn from lots of different sources, especially movies. To support the idea that we always have the ultimate freedom to choose our attitude toward any situation, no matter how difficult it may appear or actually be, let me refer to the movie, *Napoleon Dynamite*. In the film, the lead character, Napoleon Dynamite, is a geeky, oddball high school student who's favorite lines are, "Gosh, whaddaya think, freakin' idiot?" and "Sweet!" Yet, behind his obvious geekiness, is a real sweetness that most other students at his school fail to realize. Throughout the movie, the other students constantly harass and make fun of Napoleon and his geeky ways, but he just keeps on going, in effect, choosing to respond with a positive (some might say an even mature) attitude that reinforces that he knows who and how special he really is. Among other things, the movie teaches us that keeping a positive attitude, despite outside pressures to the contrary is *the way* to go!

It's important to recognize that we are creatures of habit. We often rely on the

way we have always done things. As a result we create pathways in our minds in much the same way that a path is beaten through a grass field from repeated use. Because pathways become automatic, often we don't even know we are following them. We just respond in the same way. Often we don't stop to think, maybe this situation is different; maybe this time that person didn't mean the same thing; or maybe this time it was really our fault, not someone else's. When we just follow the automatic path, we lock ourselves into doing the same thing, responding in the same way, over and over again. If we do this, we are locking ourselves into one way of responding in a kind of mental prison and, as a consequence, we become "prisoners of our thoughts."

How can we escape, you ask? What we want to do is unlock our thinking and search for other ways to respond, therefore becoming more resilient to the various life challenges that come our way. In short, we don't want to become prisoners of our thoughts in the first place! Return now to Christopher Reeve and *Napoleon Dynamite*. Although it's neither proper nor possible to compare these two experiences, both the "real" Superman and the "fictitious" Napoleon had the freedom to choose how they were going to respond to their unique set of circumstances. This "freedom to choose our attitude," I'm happy to report, belongs to each and everyone of us, regardless of who we are and what we do. If we take personal responsibility for exercising this ultimate freedom, we help to ensure we don't become prisoners of our thoughts. So, remember this: the next time you are disappointed, distressed, or even depressed about something, don't forget you still have the freedom to choose your attitude.



This is the first in a series of articles encouraging you not to become a "prisoner of your thoughts" and offering you some practical ways for increasing your capacity to deal with school, work, and personal challenges finding deeper meaning in your life and achieving your highest potential. 

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