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Could you be happier?

When you focus daily on making positive comments, the results can be fulfilling

By Maureen Neihart For The Straits Times



IF THERE was a vaccine available that would protect you from depression and increase your joy, would you take it?

It is possible to be inoculated against future depression, but it isn't a shot that you need. Rather, there are behavioural vaccines available, simple action steps proven to enhance life satisfaction, improve our health and increase our joy. Some require just a few minutes a day.

For example, there are vaccines that will strengthen our relationships. Enhancing both the number and the quality of our relationships is central to more health, hope and joy. Your relationships are probably very good. But they could be fantastic. Let me tell you how.

One vaccine is called the Losada Ratio. This is the ratio of positive to negative statements we make in our daily interactions. Science has demonstrated that larger ratios predict more positive outcomes for individuals, couples and even companies. For example, Dr John Gottman and his team at the University of Washington observed that the ratio of positive to negative statements in couples' conversations could predict the health of a relationship.

A ratio of five positive comments for every criticism was needed to predict a healthy and loving marriage. A ratio of only one positive to three negative comments predicted divorce. Dr Gottman's team was able to predict with 90 per cent accuracy which couples would divorce or remain married four to six years later just by calculating their ratio.

What does your ratio look like? Are you correcting, scolding or blaming more often than you are affirming, supporting or encouraging? Families are the first place we learn about relationships, so most of us pattern our communication on what we experienced growing up.

Some of us were raised in homes where little positive exchange was modelled. Others are from cultures where criticism is more the norm than expressions of support or encouragement.

The Losada research suggests that we need a ratio of positivity in our daily interactions that's at least three times as many positive comments as negative in order to keep our relationships strong.

But all positive without some negative can go awry. There seems to be a tipping point above 11:1 at which there

can be negative outcomes. We need some negative emotion in our lives to protect us from forces that threaten our well-being. Most of us have more positivity than negativity in our relationships, but many of us are below the tipping point of 3:1 necessary to maintain strong relationships.

Here's another vaccine to try from psychologist Shelly Gable at the University of California. She observed that what we say when things go right makes a big difference in how weak or strong our relationships become. It's the key building block of relationships. She says that when people share good news with us, there are four ways we can respond: passive destructive, active destructive, passive constructive, and active constructive. Let's look at an example to illustrate.

Imagine that a colleague shares with you that her son recently won a competition. What do you say? Many of us might respond, "That's nice", "Congratulations", or "Good for him!" These are passive constructive responses. They acknowledge the person's good news.

Some of us might not say anything. Or we might change the subject, "Did you see the paper this morning?" That's being passively destructive. People feel rebuffed by these comments. A few people are so mean that when they hear someone else's good news they respond with harsh words aimed at diminishing the other person's joy. Some examples are "They probably felt sorry for him" or "Doesn't everyone get that award eventually?" This is active destructive responding.

Active constructive responding goes beyond acknowledging to affirming the other person and engaging him to connect with us more. It builds relationships. So when your colleague tells you her child won a competition, say "That's wonderful news. I bet you're very proud of her". Then invite her to tell you more about it.

Maybe you were raised in a family where people loved and supported one another but didn't say much. Maybe no one said much at all. If so, active constructive responding might feel awkward initially and you may have doubts that it will make a difference. You don't have to take my word for it; conduct your own experiment - try it for a week and observe how people react to you and how you feel about their reactions.

Acknowledge, affirm and invite. Look for an opportunity today to affirm someone you care about when they share a positive event from their day. Invite them to tell you more about it. Notice how they respond to you when you extend more of yourself. During the upcoming week, try to affirm and invite someone two to three times a day. Notice what happens to your relationships. People will be drawn to you and will engage with you more. You could be happier.

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