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How to Thrive When Everything Feels Terrible

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We're surrounded by negativity everywhere we turn. The news we read, social media we peruse, and conversations we have and overhear. We absorb stress from our family, friends, and coworkers. And, it's taking a toll.

The Mighty, a community platform (founded by Mike) that provides health information and brings people together around specific health issues, has surveyed more than 70,000 readers and community members since March around their awareness, perceptions, and experience with the coronavirus crisis. In September, respondents reported their top three emotions were frustration,

worry, and anger. The number of respondents choosing anger as one of their top emotions has more than doubled since March — rising from 20% then to 45% in September.

Negativity can have toxic effects. In fact, Christine’s research has shown over and over that we falter when exposed to negativity or rudeness. [Witnessing rudeness](#) interferes with our working memory and decreases our performance. [Mere exposure to rude words](#) reduces our ability to process and recall information. We tend to shut down, stop communicating, and cease being helpful to others. [Dysfunctional and aggressive thoughts \(and sometimes actions\) skyrocket.](#)

Fortunately, Christine’s research also shows that there is [a productive way to counter those effects](#). It’s called thriving — the psychological state in which people experience a sense of both vitality and learning. Thriving individuals are growing, developing, and energized rather than feeling stagnated or depleted.

In studies conducted across a range of industries, Christine has found that people who experience a state of thriving are healthier, more resilient, and more able to focus on their work. When people feel even an inkling of thriving, it tends to [buffer them from distractions, stress, and negativity](#). In a study of six organizations across six different industries, employees characterized as highly thriving demonstrated 1.2 times less burnout compared with their peers. They were also 52% more confident in themselves and their ability to take control of a situation. They were far less likely to have negativity drag them into distraction or self-doubt.

So how do you increase your thriving especially when it feels like you’re drowning in negativity? Our research points to some tactics.

Avoid negativity. Pay attention to what you’re ingesting: what information you chose to read, [the media you consume](#), the music you listen to, the people you choose to spend time with, and the people you look up to. Negativity seeps into our pores through these sources. So make simple choices away from negativity and toward positivity.

Watch out for what you say out loud. Negative language is particularly insidious and potent. Be mindful of what you’re thinking and saying. Yes, those around you influence you and your mood, but we have more control over our thoughts and feelings than anyone else. And what we say out loud also carries significant weight. According to Trevor Moawad, a mental conditioning coach who works primarily with elite athletes, [it’s ten times more damaging to our sense of thriving if we verbalize a thought than if we just think it.](#)

So, think twice about how you’re framing and speaking about a situation. Instead of saying, “This is the worst I’ve ever seen,” or “It’s catastrophic,” (or “devastating” or “terrible”), tweak your language to be more neutral. You might say, “This situation is challenging,” which recognizes the opportunity for growth or learning. You can — and should — acknowledge the truth, while minimizing its power to drag you down.

Adopt a neutral mindset. Negative thoughts and worries take us o

surround yourself and spend more time with *energizers* — the people in your life who make you smile and laugh, and lift your spirits.

You may not be able to stop the flow of negativity in your life, especially right now, but you can resist its toxic effects by making smart choices about who and what you surround yourself with, the mindset you adapt, and the information you consume. Not only will you be better off because of these choices — those around you will too.

Editor's note (10/30): This piece was updated to restore a paragraph that was accidentally left out when it was originally published.

Christine Porath is a professor of management at Georgetown University and the author of [Mastering Civility: A Manifesto for the Workplace](#).

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