

Negate Negativity! How to Cure Kill-Joys in Your Life

In 1986, I had the good fortune to become involved in the wonderful world of orthodontics. As a consultant and speaker, I have worked in a wide variety of industries: from large oil and gas companies, to the local hair salon and florists. Since what I do addresses how you are *being* at work, rather than what you are *doing* at work, I am able to contribute to just about any industry. My basic premise is that *all* work makes a difference. Henry Giles said it best:

Man must work, that is certain as the sun. But he may work grudgingly or he may work gratefully; he may work as a man or he may work as a machine. There is no work so rude, that he may not exalt it; no work so impassive, that he may not breathe a soul into it; no work so dull that he may not enliven it.

That being said, orthodontics stands above most other industries by virtue of the fact it is a transformative business. You don't just straighten teeth—you change people's lives; you give people the chance to smile brightly at the world; you change how they think of themselves and what they see is possible for their futures. Your work truly makes a difference in the quality of people's lives.

In addition to this, you work in very pleasant environments that are generally upbeat and happy, your work doesn't have the stress factors that are associated with brain surgery or dismantling bombs, and many offices operate on a 4-day work week.

So it still amazes me that the number one complaint I hear from both doctors and staffs is about the person on staff (and sad to say it is sometimes the doctor!) who is a pitiful abysmal pit of negativity. He/she normally comes into work with a look on his/her face that you'd think she was sucking lemons all the way to work. She slouches in meetings; never volunteers for projects and complains about the ones she has to do; usually has some sad tale about her home-life, traffic, the weather, her neighbors, and the patients she has to see; and she is quick to point

out the errors of everyone else while resorting to blame and excuses when she makes a mistake. Like Stephen Hawking's "black hole" theory, he/she sucks energy from everyone around and is the proverbial wet rag on the practice.

What amazes me even more is that he/she still has a job!

When I ask the doctor why this person is employed in the practice, I get a variety of reasons: she's really good with patients (really?!?); she has good hands; she's been in the practice so long and knows everyone and everything about the practice; it's hard to find a replacement; and on and on and on ad nauseum.

While I could take apart each of the above reasons, I will just remind you of an old adage: When all is said and done, either you have the results or the reasons why not. Since most people want to be liked, they become "reasonable" and forego the results they want in the process.

Said another way, when people let the desire or need to be liked, be more important than their purpose in life, people are more likely to tolerate the intolerable.

To stay on track and maintain clarity about your purpose, then it is useful to frequently ask yourself, especially when difficult situations arise in life, "what actions will really serve this person". Sometimes what will serve him/her is to be a soft place to land; many times what will serve someone is to be the one who holds him or her accountable. This does not require you to be mean about it; it does require that you be willing to be uncomfortable and yet be straight forward, respectful, thoughtful and honest.

I'd like to offer a different point of view about the Negative Nellie/Nelson in your practice by asking a few "duh!" questions. Does that negative person appear to be happy or suffering? Does it serve that person to continue to suffer? For most people the only reasons not to intervene are due to lack of know-how and the desire to "keep the peace" even though not intervening causes more stress.

Several years ago, in my pre-consult meetings with a doctor and from the staff questionnaires, I learned of a staff person who “everyone loved” but who frequently dragged everyone down by her negative attitude. She would come in for the staff huddle looking tired and drawn, and moaning about how her family didn’t appreciate her and the problems they were causing her. Since the doctor and staff liked her, they offered her sympathy. In order to be sympathetic, they had to shift their mood downward to her emotional level...thus the “dragging down” effect.

The first morning of the consult, after the doctor introduced me to everyone, I started the meeting by leading the staff huddle ala Garbo style. I greeted each person and asked how they were, and all gave me warm smiles back and said “great” or “good to be here” or some other upbeat response. Except for Sorry Sally. She didn’t make eye-contact with me, mostly looking down at the floor, arms crossed and slouching, and responded “fine, I guess”. I gently asked her if there was someone else I should ask who would know for sure how she was? While this seemed to annoy her, the rest of the staff started to perk up. I continued to gently press in on her till her eyes welled up and she told me her sad story.

I then confessed to her that I already knew about her situation, and that in fact the doctor and I had discussed it in our meeting, since he was concerned about her. I told her that we had decided she really needed and deserved a paid-vacation to a place where she would be loved, valued and appreciated. By now she was looking at me wide-eyed with her mouth somewhat agape—as were the doctor and the staff, for that matter. I also told her it was a very short vacation: only eight hours long, but she could take that vacation from her problems five days a week.

In a nanosecond, she went from being disappointed to “I got it!” I could see it in her eyes, almost as if a light went on.

The “light” that comes on is “I can choose/I have choice/I am the chooser”. I may not like, I may even hate, my circumstances, but I get to choose what I am going to do about it.

So I asked her what was she willing to choose now? She responded by promising to come to work with the attitude of gratitude. And that is exactly what she did. In the years I have known the doctor, he told me that was the last day she showed up at work being Sorry Sally. He told me the best part was that, as time went on, she became the CMO (Chief Motivating Officer) on the team, and (lo and behold) her home life dramatically improved!

What is of lasting value to my clients is not telling them what to do or say, but rather directing them to use the operating principles with which to think so that they are empowered to act independently. The same is true in training people for any skill. When someone knows the "why" of something, they will learn the "how" more easily and are enabled to operate autonomously.

One of the keys for successful relationships is based on the following principles and in this hierarchy:

1. Do no harm.
2. Tell no lies.
3. Resolve tolerances.

As an example, telling someone she is fat and ugly may be the truth, but it does harm. That's a "no-no". However, if someone is consistently dressing in a way that is detrimental to his/her stated goals in life, then it's probably time for a loving conversation for intervention.

It is the third principle, resolve tolerances, that people find the most difficult to follow. We tend to remain silent, while seething inside, until we erupt in anger when we can no longer take the unwanted but tolerated behavior.

The ensuing upset and anger only serve to reinforce the notion that confronting others is hard and nasty. This is true. However, I recommend that you do not confront people with issues; confront issues *with* people.

Sometimes people need a soft landing, such as a family crisis, sudden illness, etc, and you should provide it. The people who need to be dealt

with more firmly are the ones who drive up to work every day in their wambulance with the sirens going full blast---waaaa waaaa waaa!

In his book Leadership, Rudy Guilianni attributes much of his success in dramatically turning around New York City's high crime rate to addressing small problems before they evolved into big ones. Applying the corollary of this principle to "Sorry Sally", every day you tolerate poor attitudes, you give tacit permission for the poor attitudes to grow. To be responsible for the times you ignored the problem, and in order that you are fair to Sally, you need to give her the chance to correct her negative behavior. If she ignores that chance, then it becomes time to "up the ante" and if necessary, have her leave.

If that sounds rough or mean to you, then consider this: Negativity is like a disease which, if left untreated, can maim or even kill you. It is a joy stealer; you need to resolve tolerating it in your life.

In a world populated with media whose focus is "if it bleeds, it leads", we are bombarded with bad news. Being negative is easy; taking the high road is not, but it is the high road that will get you to your goals.

Negativity is a habit that some may find difficult to break but it can be done. Here are some basic easy steps to start implementing in your life and they are based on a quirky phrase that my mother used to admonish us: "put the ac-CENT' on the right sy-LA'-ble." Look for and focus on what is working in your life and practice. Bask in the knowledge that you are in a profession saturated with blessings. Acknowledge publicly and frequently when a job is well done, results are produced, or goals are achieved. Notice the "little things" people do to help each other; make sure you're doing "little things" as well. Smile for no reason when you're by yourself walking down a street. Find ways to pay it forward for all the blessings you've had and the people who helped make you a success. Find ten things for which you can be grateful, and do that everyday.

Following these principles will make it easy for you to be able to say with enthusiasm: Every day above ground is a great one!