

A (new and revised) silver linings playbook

June 27, 2013

The Serenity Prayer is the cornerstone of many addiction recovery programs, including Alcoholics Anonymous. Borrowed from the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, it is most often recited this way today: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

The prayer captures the paradoxical nature of addiction and recovery. Alcoholics must accept the fact that they are powerless over alcohol and cannot drink, ever. But alcoholics are still agents with plenty of personal power to change their own lives. Indeed, they must take control of their daily lives to remain sober—by avoiding temptation, exerting discipline in the face of temptation, seeking counseling and social support, and taking whatever steps are needed to prevent relapse. Success depends on both surrender and action.

Niebuhr did not write the Serenity Prayer for addicts, but rather for anyone facing life’s travails. There are times for all of us when it’s best to accept what’s thrown at us, try to keep it in perspective, look for silver linings, and so forth. Other times require that we put our heads down and solve problems. The trick is knowing which to do when.

This wisdom may be supported by scientific evidence, as it turns out. It’s been known for some time that one of the most effective strategies for coping with bad things is “cognitive reappraisal”—which is really just acceptance and perspective taking. People who, instead of railing at the heavens, can reframe negative experiences and emotions to make them more tolerable—these people tend to do much better psychologically in the long run.

But psychological scientist Iris Mauss, of UC Berkeley, doesn’t believe that cognitive reappraisal tells the whole story. Aren’t there circumstances, she wondered, when such a coping strategy is self-defeating, when acceptance and reappraisal keep us from taking charge of our lives? Mauss and her colleagues suspected that the success or failure of this strategy would depend on the situation one faces—specifically, whether circumstances—and accompanying stress—are truly beyond one’s control, or in fact manageable.

Here’s an example: If I have a loved one who becomes very ill with cancer, there is very little that I can do to change that. My determination to “fix” the situation or solve the problem, however valiant, will most likely be futile and perhaps even harmful in the end. What I can do, however—the only thing really—is control my emotional reaction to this misfortune. Cognitive reappraisal helps with this kind of emotional regulation—with downstream mental health benefits.

If, by contrast, I am struggling at work and risk losing my job, that might be a situation calling for action. Perhaps I can work harder or talk to my boss about performance issues—do something to proactively change my situation. In this case, simply accepting my situation as one of life’s

misfortunes—and coping emotionally—this strategy could actually be maladaptive, leading to passivity that actually exacerbates my job situation and increases stress.

This is the theory that Mauss and her colleagues decided to test in the lab. They recruited a group of people from the community, all of whom had experienced a stressful life event in the past eight weeks. They ranged in age from 21 to 60 years old. These volunteers completed measures of their cognitive reappraisal ability; recent stressful events in their lives; the controllability of these stressful events; and symptoms of depression. The goal was to see if reappraisal was an effective coping strategy when life's stress was uncontrollable, but a harmful strategy when the bad situation was manageable.

And that's precisely what they found, and report in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*. When volunteers were facing family illnesses and other similarly uncontrollable events, rethinking and emotional regulation diminished symptoms of depression. But when their stresses were things like job problems—things that might be fixed—then reappraisal and emotional coping failed—leading to more, not less, depression.

So what is the most adaptive way to cope when bad things happen? These findings suggest that flexibility may be the key. That is, effective coping may require different regulatory strategies depending on the situation. Seen this way, psychological dysfunction is best seen as a failure to discriminate one stressful situation from another.

Excerpts from Wray Herbert's blog—"We're Only Human" and "Full Frontal Psychology"—appear regularly in *The Huffington Post* and elsewhere.