

Chapter 1

Positive Thinking

Building Realistic Optimism

Lack of social and sporting success, and often also lack of academic success, may result in a negative daily school and work experience for the young person with autism. This may be compounded by a continual anxiety that comes from being unable to predict what may happen next, confusion over language, and a sensory dysregulation. Often this may be exacerbated by neurotypical adults misunderstanding the responses of the young person, leading to unfair discipline and sanctions.

The human brain is instinctively more tuned to negative happenings than positive, in order to take action to keep us safe and ensure survival. Frederickson describes in her book *Positivity* how neurotypicals need three positive experiences to every negative experience in order to flourish (Frederickson, 2010). I suspect that this ratio needs to be much higher for those with autism, in order to redress the balance, and therefore maintain reasonable mental

wellbeing. Active intervention to increase positivity in every way possible is therefore needed.

Using a positive link phrase

To help my son, I began in his early childhood to consistently model a positive take on the small disappointments in day-to-day life. I was aiming to build a familiar framework and skill set, as a habit, so that when larger challenges arose later on in life this realistic yet optimistic way of thinking would kick in semi-automatically for him. I continued to do this in a consistent manner, despite not seeing any initial progress, and many years later I began to witness the development of a more positive balance in his interpretation of the disappointing situations he encounters on a day-to-day basis. His resilience is definitely improving. On occasions he is now even reminding me to ‘look on the positive side’.

How did I go about this? Each time there was an unexpected situation that meant something Mark was looking forward to was cancelled, postponed or changed, I would remain very calm, while acknowledging and validating the disappointing feeling. Then, *in the same sentence*, I would describe a positive outcome that might happen instead, or something that might be learnt from the situation. I did this by linking both statements with what I called my positive phrase: ‘...but on the positive side...’

I continually tried to think of positive alternative things to suggest that interested Mark and would hold some attraction for him even in the face of a huge disappointment. I always used the literal, accurate and meaningful language

that is so much part of the Social Story™ approach. I did not dismiss the disappointment, but instead tried to include it in a positive balancing statement. I think it is the idea of this balance that made Mark eventually choose the phrase ‘in return’ for his positive phrase, which is meaningful for him, and he now spontaneously uses this phrase in the way I have previously modelled for him. Another child may find the use of colour to represent the ‘positive side’ more useful. Parents and professionals need to find a link phrase that is meaningful for the young person they are working with. Care should be taken with phrases that are not literally meaningful, for example ‘on the other hand’. In the Stories included here I have continued to use ‘on the positive side’ as the positive link phrase.

A good example of how I used this positive link phrase to consider both the negative and positive in the same sentence occurred when the swimming pool was closed unexpectedly and Mark’s regular swimming lesson was cancelled. We discovered this only when we arrived at the door to the pool. I quickly modelled a positive response by describing what might happen instead of a swimming lesson by saying, ‘This is *very* disappointing, *but on the positive side* you will have more time for gaming before tea.’ He began to think about this possible positive outcome and started to settle even though he was hugely upset. Because this had clearly worked, I wrote a short Social Story about it later that evening so we could reflect on it again and again. By stating what was disappointing and then linking that with a positive outcome, I was demonstrating that there

is always something positive to find even in a challenging disappointment.

Another example was when a meet-up with friends to play Yu-gi-oh cards was cancelled at the last minute. Mark was very disappointed. I thought quickly and said, ‘This is *really* disappointing, *but on the positive side* you will have more time to prepare an even better deck of cards before the next meet-up.’ I knew that building a great set of cards in a deck was important to Mark and could help him do better at the game, but it did take time to do. Although upset, he could see that this was a possible positive outcome and again settled quickly. I wrote a Social Story about it.

A much more up-to-date and recent example happened when Mark’s driving instructor was changed unexpectedly without warning by the driving centre. I was expecting him to have a great deal of anxiety and possibly refuse to drive as a result. I remained calm, which was difficult, and reflected on how surprising and unexpected this had been: ‘Well, that is a surprise, which is very uncomfy, *but on the positive side* maybe you may learn something new from this instructor.’

Mark agreed to have his lesson and afterwards told his dad that although it had been a surprise which was *definitely* uncomfy, ‘in return’ he had learnt how to change gear without looking at the gearstick, which was a new skill. This was the first time I heard him use his own positive phrase.

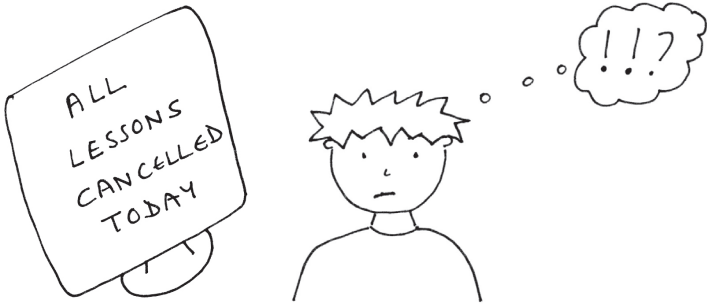
Beginning to think in a positive way

Most of the time good things happen.
Sometimes disappointing things happen.
This is how life happens for all adults
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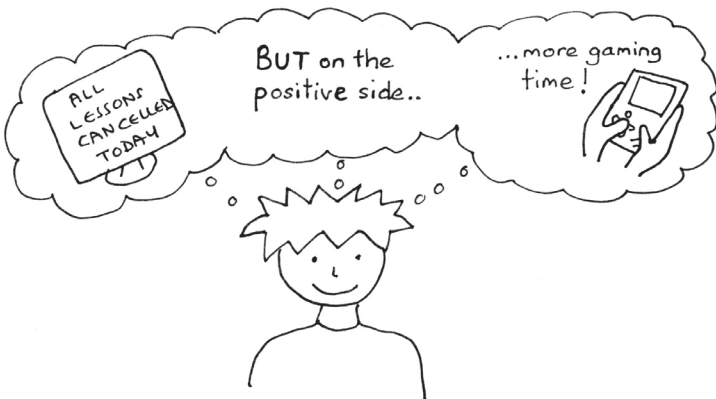
Yesterday many good things happened
and one disappointing thing happened. I
got a certificate at assembly, I enjoyed
my Art lesson and I played a game at
break time. These were all good positive
things to happen.



After school my swimming lesson was cancelled. This was very disappointing.



Mum helped me think about what good things could happen instead of my swimming lesson. I used my positive phrase to think, 'I am disappointed, **but on the positive side** I have more time to play games before tea.'



I played my game before tea and went up a level. It was disappointing to have a lesson cancelled, ***but on the positive side*** I enjoyed playing my game.

I am beginning to think in a positive way about disappointing events.

Learning to think in a positive way

Most of the time good things happen. Sometimes disappointing things happen. This is how life happens for all adults and children. Learning to think about things that happen in life in a positive way usually helps people feel happier.

There is usually something positive in every situation. I am learning to think about disappointing situations in a positive way. To do this I may think about what positive things may happen instead or I may think about what I may learn from the situation. Thinking in a positive way is sometimes called 'looking on the positive side'.

A positive phrase may help me to think about a situation in a positive way. One positive phrase is '*...but on the positive side...*' Mum sometimes uses this phrase to help her think about what is positive in

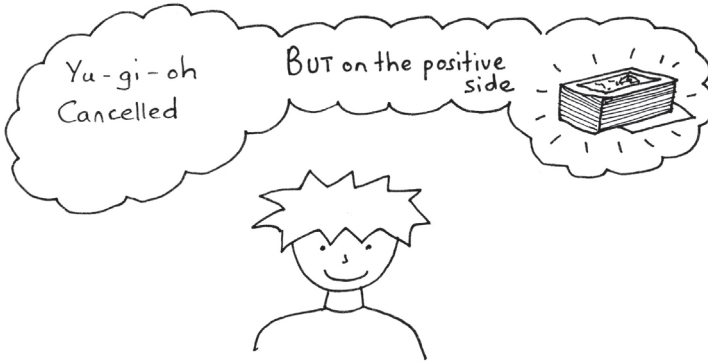
a disappointing situation. I may use this phrase too or I may choose another one. This is okay.



Two weeks ago, my swimming lesson was cancelled. I was disappointed but I thought about what good things may happen instead. I used my positive phrase to think, 'I am disappointed, **but on the positive side** I have more time to play games before tea.'



Last Saturday I was expecting to meet my friends to play Yu-gi-oh but the day was cancelled. I was disappointed but I used my positive phrase to think, 'This is disappointing, **but on the positive side** I have more time to improve my deck before we next meet up.'



Sometimes it is easy to think what the positive side is, sometimes it is tricky. When it is tricky Mum knows how to help me. Thinking in a positive way needs practice. With practice it usually becomes easier to do.

I am learning to use my positive phrase to think about things in a positive way.

