



Northeast and Caribbean (HHS Region 2)

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Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network

Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

# Flourishing at Work: A Plan for Helping Professionals Podcast Series

## Transcript – Healthy Positivity

Michelle: Hi there. My name is Michelle Zechner. I'm faculty at Rutgers University School of Health Professions Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling Professions, and I'm back with Dr. Tony Zippel, a psychologist with years of building effective organizations and teams. We are hosts for [\*Flourishing at Work, a Plan for Helping Professionals\*](#), a podcast series. Hey Tony!

Tony: Good to be here with you, Michelle.

Michelle: Glad to be back with you! Today we're going to talk about healthier positivity. Positivity is a powerful strategy to help us build resilience and flourish. It's important to consider how we introduce healthier positivity into our lives and the lives of people we support that feels good, helpful and supportive and recognizes what's going on in our lives. It doesn't ignore the bad stuff.

Tony, you and I were talking a little bit about this earlier that healthy positivity doesn't just mean ignoring the negatives and that kind of surprised me.

Tony: Why, you know, positivity has gotten a really bad name in recent years because there's so much out there in the popular press about, you know, just look at "the bright side of things" and "focus on the good things", "if you focus on a positive goal you'll achieve it". And we know that's not true. In fact, ignoring the stresses and challenges that we face actually makes things worse. So, I think that the goal that we need to have is not so much about how we ignore bad things and just look at good things, but how we really look courageously at the challenges we face because those are real. Those are painful, those are difficult. But, at the same time, can we also attend to and focus on and make use of the positive things as well? How do we build internal resources so that we can face those challenges?

Michelle: I love that idea and what I hear what you're saying a little bit, is balance, that we have to sort of acknowledge how we're feeling in that moment and we recognize that things can be difficult, but we also balance that out with "where can we go from here, and what actions can we take". How can we frame our thinking so that we don't get sort of, I don't want to say, sucked down or lost in our negativity or the challenges that we're experiencing but we have something that can help us in that moment.

Tony: Yeah, how do you balance that? How do you, on one hand, look courageously at some of the difficulties you're facing, the challenges and the bad things that are in your life? How do you look at that courageously, and at the same time have confidence and belief that you have resources to do some things that can make it better, that allow you to move forward in the face of those challenges?

Michelle: Yeah, yeah. And I imagine that a lot of us are kind of in that phase right now with COVID still continuing and with many of us reevaluating our work and the stress of supporting other people in education, in mental health services and other health professions. We are starting to feel the effects of all of this which has been what the series has been about. But, what I also hear you saying is that we can actually practice some tools and go forward so that we can move forward in a more positive way, let's say that.

Tony: Well that's right, and even when we're having really difficult times in our lives, there are more good moments than bad moments, you know, there are more positive things that occur. The challenge with it is that the good things that happen in our lives, we tend not to pay as much attention to, they sort of slip away easily but when something bad happens boy, you know we worry about it, we ruminate about it. Rick Hansen likes to say that bad things in our lives are like Velcro, you know, they really stick in our brains. The good things are like Teflon, they sort of slip away, and it takes conscious effort to grab on to those positive things and make them a little stickier so that they get installed, and we can do some of those neurologic changes that occur when we really let them sink in and become part of us.

Michelle: Nice. Well, and so that's really helpful to think about it as we can change our brain a little bit by this sort of reframing, but I'm kind of wondering. You started talking about the neural lot, the changes that can happen in our brain as a result of this positive thinking. I'm kind of curious, what are some of the other benefits to striving towards a more positive way of thinking and optimism?

Tony: Well, it's a great question and we know that higher levels of optimism, confidence about the ability to face things, deeper internal resources for managing those stressful things that occur have all sorts of benefits. We know that it improves our physical health, immune system response goes up, athleticism and our tendency to move and exercise goes up. Life expectancy increases in noticeable ways so there are physical benefits to it. Psychologically, we feel better, we're happier and we are less likely to have anxiety and depression.

We have higher levels of self-esteem, our ability to focus and problem solve goes up. We sleep better. Lots of those kinds of benefits happen as well. And they're also social benefits, our relationships improve. It's easier for us to connect with people. We are more likely to work with people to solve problems than we are to be irritable, aggressive and angry with people. There's just a whole host of benefits that go along with being able to approach things in a way that has more optimism, confidence and higher levels of self management in them.

Michelle: So these benefits that you're talking about, it isn't that we're talking about getting out the pom poms and the glitter cannons as we've talked about in the past. But, it's really just those subtle shifts and addressing or reacting to the challenges that we have in a day or the bigger challenges that can actually lead to positive changes in our life.

Tony: Well I think that's exactly right. When you think about what happens when we're stressed and feeling threatened we sort of dropped into, you know "lizard brain", fight or flight kinds of things and and the more time we spend there, the more powerful and prominent those neural pathways become. We know brains change and adapt to that. On the other hand, if we spend more time focused on those things that help us to build internal resources, you know, fortify sections of the brain that have to do with decision making, with relationship building, with social connection, and we fortify those parts of the brain. Think about how life is different for us when we have much more strength in those areas than we do in the threat and fight or flight part of our brain, we can be more thoughtful and plan for and connected, as opposed to, you know, feeling threatened and have the need to either smack somebody or run away.

Michelle: Well, I don't really want to smack somebody or run away or be a lizard so I guess I'm on this path for healthier positivity. But what I also hear in your suggestion is that it takes focus and concentration. And I'm wondering if you can sort of reflect on, a little bit, about the types of these small daily actions we might take for good finding, optimism building or being healthy in our positivity.

Tony: Yeah, my favorite tool for this is one that [Dr. Rick Hansen](#) uses. It's called [HEAL](#), and and it's something that when you learn it, you can do a HEAL intervention on the fly in your own life in 60 to 120 seconds. It doesn't take very long. HEAL stands for "Have a positive experience, Enrich the positive experience, Absorb the experience, and then try to Link it up to negative material and hold the two simultaneously". So, if you want to, I could talk through those, adding a little more detail.

Michelle: Yeah, I would love that. I think that would help me and our listeners get it better.

Tony: So, we have, as I said, hundreds and hundreds of positive experiences, every day in our lives. We just let them slip away but if we bring them to mind, and have that experience, you know, really think about it, it can make a difference.

So, for me, I'm having a positive experience right now. I'm recalling walking with my dog this morning, and the sun was coming up, and the air was crisp and cool and I was out walking with my dog at day-break. So that's my positive experience, so I'm bringing that to mind. It can be something that's happening right now, it could be a memory of an experience, it can be something you imagine. Then you want to enrich it by bringing to mind detail about it. So it's not just here it is and let it slip away. But let me really get an image of what that is, let me see if I can see and imagine the sun as it comes up and my dog is walking along in front of me, and I see him turning to me and me leaning down and petting him. Enrich the experience by holding it, and by looking at some of the details with it. Let it really stick with you for a minute. And then try to absorb it. You really want to try to get a visceral sense of what that is. Can you convert that to an experience that really sinks into you. Some people will do things like put their hand over their hearts and really feel it sinking in or they imagine this experience is like a precious jewel that I can install on my chest and carry with me everywhere I go, or, you know, it's like gold dust. I can feel the warmth as it filters down and coats me as I carry it. So you want to really absorb it, let it sink into you. So those three parts have a positive experience, enrich it and absorb it. You can do that in in 30 or 60 seconds, it doesn't take a lot.

The L part of it is kind of optional but if you can do it it's really powerful. Can you hold that positive experience and at the same time, hold some negative content. So, maybe you're feeling a little bit stressed about work and so, can you let that sense of being stressed about work and what that's about

into your consciousness, while you're holding on to that positive experience. And over time, and I don't mean a lot but over 30 or 60 seconds let that positive experience kind of overwhelm and absorb that negative pull that you feel. The negative stuff doesn't go away. It's still there, but the positive stuff is so much more powerful and so much more useful. So it's having a positive experience and installing it in your brain so that it's used to making neurologic changes, and to be there as a resource for you as you move forward.

One minute, two minutes, just imagine what it would be like if you did this 4, 5, 10 times a day. How would it be different if you had that kind of be positive experience more often?

Michelle: Yeah, yeah. I was taken away while we were talking. I was really with you in that experience and something that came to mind is I may have been doing this inadvertently. I also am a pet lover. I have cats and I had a cat at one point, who was very fluffy like a pillow and when she would purr and sit on my lap, it just really really took me to a new level place.

And then I had to go to the dentist. There, I just imagined this purring warm energy that was sitting on my lap was with me in that moment, and it really did help me feel more positive, about being in the dental chair and, you know, just a little more connected. So I don't know, and it sounds like it needs to be a little bit more intentional than I made it. What do you think, Tony?

Tony: Intentionality is really important in this. You know, one of the most important parts of absorbing the experience is having the intention to let it sink in. Let it really be a part of you, so that the more intentional it is, the more powerful it is. It's making a choice about it.

Michelle: Yeah, yeah. Oh I love that a lot. And so, that is [HEAL, H.E.A.L.](#) And that comes from [Dr. Rick Hansen](#).

Tony: You'll find a lot of things on the web. If you want to see a [TED talk with Rick](#), he's got a really good one out there. There's a lot of material about it because it is such a direct, powerful and useful intervention.

Michelle: Very cool. Well, I think, we're going to stop our content there and sort of say, just a little summary of what we talked about today. We really focused on this idea that healthy positivity means that we're navigating life in a productive way, despite whatever is going on in our life. We're acknowledging our situation. It may be hard in the moment. We're not ignoring those negative moments, but we're trying to build our positive resources despite whatever we're experiencing. Because this idea of positivity and optimism and being healthy in our positivity, it benefits us so much in terms of our physical, emotional, social, and so many other ways in our life. We can address some of our challenges by really pulling into the positive experiences we have. And, we talked about this one idea of HEAL, which Tony gave us an example for. Tony anything else you want to highlight for our from our discussion today?

Tony: No, I think that's a great summary Michelle. I think the thing I always remind people of is that they have a choice at every moment. You know we sometimes forget our own level of agency in situations and we feel buffeted by circumstances and we're completely out of control. We need to slow down and remind ourselves that we always have a choice. We have a choice about how we think about things. We have a choice about how we feel about them. And we have a choice about what we do next,

and can we use that sense of agency to build internal resources to cope with stress and difficulties that we face. That's positivity that I think is really useful and works for us.

Michelle: Thank you, Tony. Thank you. You've given us a lot to think about today. We, as always, have a few questions that we invite you to consider in the next week or so to imagine positivity and healthy positivity in your own life.

The first question: How are you going to recognize and take advantage of positive moments, build your own internal resources, in order to increase your level of well-being? Again, that's how can you recognize and take advantage of those positive moments in your life, to build your internal resources keep that gemstone of the walk in the morning with your dog or a moment with your children or that great lunch you had with your significant other or friend. How can you really take that in and and keep it inside of you to build your own sense of well being?

And second: A second question would be, how would your life be different if you paused a few times a day to take in the good in your life, really let it sink in and appreciate it? What would it be like if taking in the good became a habit for you? Again, that question: How would your life be different if you paused a few times a day to take in the good in your life, really let it sink in and appreciate it? What would it be like if taking in the good became a habit for you?

That's really what we're talking about is making these ideas a habit and sticking with them. So, next time we're going to be talking about flourishing strategies outside the box using creativity to expand flourishing at work.

Thanks for listening, I'm Michelle Zechner and I'm with Dr. Tony Zipple and we're so grateful for the important work that you are doing. Remember to take some time for your self-care today. You matter.

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