

Equanimity

“For a while you get mad, then you get over it.” Robyn Williams.

Equanimity is a state of mental composure and calm, especially in a stressful situation, that allows a person to experience unpleasant emotions without repressing, denying or overreacting to them. A person with equanimity can respond to pleasant experiences without getting too excited or becoming addicted to them. It is a highly desirable skill to cultivate in our tumultuous modern society.

According to the Dalai Lama, “Equanimity will give you the ability to prevent yourself from being overwhelmed by circumstances, good or bad. It... allows you to be free from being caught up in the play of emotions.”

Equanimity is exemplified by professional athletes, such as Joe Montana (aka “Joe Cool”), political leaders, such as Winston Churchill, (aka “the British bulldog”) and people such as pilot Jim West, who crash landed his Cessna 206 with skydivers on board when his engine abruptly stopped 400 ft. off the runway in Florida in 2005. At the moment the engine seized, Jim turned to his passengers and said in his classic Ohio drawl, “You’ll want to keep your eyes open boys, ‘cause this is going to be a good one.” Although the plane was a total loss, everyone walked away unharmed due to Jim’s extraordinary calm and his ability to control an airplane with a dead stick.ⁱⁱ When most of us would be in full panic mode, these leaders stay focused on the task at hand and don’t let their emotions hijack their problem-solving prefrontal cortex. They also exhibit **grounded optimism**, a combination of **positive attitude and a pragmatic assessment** of the situation. Scientific research has shown these are skills you can develop.

How can we learn grounded optimism?

- 1) Look closely at your response to **ADVERSITY. How do you interpret it?**
- 2) In Aug. 2019, I had surgery to remove a cancerous lesion on my nose. When a second spot showed up in July, 2020, I was upset at my Moh’s surgery doctor for not getting all the cancer the first time. My **BELIEF** was it was the doctor’s fault. **But is that accurate?**
- 3) The **CONSEQUENCE** of my beliefs is that I let my emotions get the best of me. I got angry. I had a hard time sleeping. Then I realized, **I can’t control** what already happened or the cancer, **only my response**. Worry about something I can’t control will only impair my immune system’s

response to the cancer. **Is that useful?** I choose to focus on what I can control-**not thinking negatively, but being realistic.**

- 4) First, I haven't gotten the results of the biopsy back, so **I'm assuming** it will come back positive. Second, there could have been a few precancerous cells outside the margins my doctor removed. **There's no way she could have detected those.** I survived one Moh's surgery on my nose. I can handle another. **It's not a catastrophe.** In **DISPUTING** my negative assumptions, I'm not being blindly optimistic. Grounded optimism is about accuracy and looking at the facts.ⁱⁱⁱ I may have cancer. I don't know yet. If I do, I'll get it removed promptly.

What other strategies does neuroscience offer us to build our equanimity?

- 1) MRI imaging studies have shown that 8 weeks of meditation training reduces the emotional reactivity of the amygdala, our flight or fight center, and increased the connectivity between the amygdala and the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, which supports executive functions such as decision making, self-control and morality.^{iv}
- 2) If you don't meditate, simple mindful awareness reduces obsessing about problems or failures^v and increases self-compassion.^{vi} Mindfulness is a natural quality we all have. It's the simple art of creating space for ourselves to think and reflect before we react to a challenging situation.

ⁱ Dalai Lama, *An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company; 2001 Pg.162

ⁱⁱ T. Kolditz, "In Extremis Leadership: Leading as if your life depended on it." (2007) John Wiley & Sons. Pgs. 123-124.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Seligman, "Learned Optimism." (1990) Simon & Schuster. Pgs.213-225.

^{iv} T. Kral et al. "Impact of short- and long-term mindfulness meditation training on amygdala reactivity to emotional stimuli" *NeuroImage*. Published July 25 2018.
doi:10.1016/j.neuroimage.2018.07.013

^v B. Bajaj and N. Pande, "Mediating role of resilience in the impact of mindfulness on life satisfaction and affect as indices of subjective well-being. (2015) "Personality and Individual Differences." Sept. pgs. 63-67, DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2015.09.005

^{vi} D. Campos et al, "Meditation and Happiness: Mindfulness and self-compassion mediate the meditation-happiness relationship." (2016) "Personality and Individual Differences." April pgs. 80-85,
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.08.040>