

The Power of a Positive Attitude and a Garbage-Free Mind

by Hal Urban



There are only two kinds of attitudes: good and bad. Your attitude is your control center. It's a frame of mind—the way we view and approach every aspect of life.

We reap what we sow. If we have a positive attitude, we expect the best and act accordingly. If we have a negative attitude, we expect the worst and act accordingly.

Researchers at the Mayo Clinic have concluded that optimistic people live longer, are healthier, endure less stress, enjoy life more, deal more effectively with hardship, are more adventurous, have more friends, and are more successful in their careers.

Your attitude influences everything you do.

What Determines Attitude?

In my high school classroom, I wrote this question on the chalkboard: "What determines your attitude at any given moment?"

I gave all my students a half sheet of paper, and asked them to answer the question briefly. Here are the most common responses:

- It depends on the mood I'm in.
- The day of the week—bad mood on Monday, good mood on Friday.
- Where I am.
- What I'm doing.
- It all depends on who I'm with.
- Which class I'm in.
- The weather.

I said:

According to your answers, your attitudes are always determined by something outside yourself. You have no choice in the matter and no control over them. Your attitudes are held captive by people, places, times, things, and conditions.

I then added with a big smile:

WRONG, WRONG, WRONG! I am now about to teach you the most valuable thing you'll ever learn from me. Your attitude is a choice—the most important one you'll ever make. You make this choice every minute of every day, and it will influence literally everything you do.

Look upon your attitude as the engine that runs your life. The most important thing to understand about this is that your attitude will ALWAYS be a choice, no matter what your circumstances are.

Bruce Diaso: An Amazing Attitude

When I was a sophomore at the University of San Francisco (USF), I met an 18-year-old freshman who had a profound effect on my life because he had the best attitude of anyone I've ever known.

Bruce Diaso had been a great high school football player and was planning to attend the University of Notre Dame on an athletic scholarship. But in his senior year, he was stricken with polio a few weeks before the Salk polio vaccine was available. He almost died, was in the hospital for several weeks, and ended up paralyzed. He could talk and move his head, hands, and fingers, but he couldn't move his legs and arms.

Through sheer determination and hard work, however, he earned an academic scholarship to USF. His roommate and a few guys who lived in dorm rooms nearby were his caretakers.

Bruce was, without question, the most admired and loved student at the university in the four years he was there. He had a big smile and a good word for everyone. He was also a brilliant and unbelievably dedicated student. He wanted to learn everything.

One day, I got to eat lunch with Bruce alone. I asked him if he had been born with his incredible attitude. He laughed, and said,

No, Hal, I promise you I wasn't born with this attitude. I developed it. I learned that it's a choice, and that anyone can have the same attitude I have.

Bruce said that when he got polio and learned that he would never walk or lift his arms again, he sank into a deeply negative funk. He said the two words that best described his attitude then were *anger* and *self-pity*. His doctor challenged him one day by asking if the anger and self-pity were making things better or making things worse. He said, "Bruce, change your attitude, change your life." Bruce realized that he was poisoning himself. And he realized it was his choice to do so.

Bruce thought about it for a few days, and eventually chose two new words that would define his attitude: *thankfulness* and *opportunity*. He became thankful for all the things he used to take for granted. Among them were God (he believed there was a reason for everything), his family,

People with a GOOD ATTITUDE . . .	People with a BAD ATTITUDE . . .
are optimistic	are pessimistic
focus on what's good	focus on what's bad
see opportunities	see problems
are thankful	complain
motivate themselves	wait to be motivated
accept hardship and deal with it	feel sorry for themselves
are determined	give up easily
are upbeat and lift others' spirits	are downbeat and drag others down

friends, teachers, his country, intelligence, his education, and all the opportunities he saw in life despite his handicap.

I suddenly realized that I had all the same things in my life (without the handicap), and had always taken them for granted.

The most important thing Bruce taught me was that our attitude is our "control center." He said:

Whether you're in perfect health or have a handicap like mine, you can choose your attitude any minute of the day. Do you realize that being able to power your own attitude is the greatest power and the greatest freedom you'll ever have?

My conversation with Bruce that day turned out to be what I refer to as a "defining moment." It changed my attitude, and it changed my life.

After graduating from USF summa cum laude and accepting a scholarship to its law school, Bruce's success continued. Three years later, he again graduated with the highest honors. He turned down several high-paying salaries from prestigious law firms all over the country. Instead, he accepted a position as a public defender in his home town, did free legal work for charitable organizations, and devoted the rest of his life to helping people who were poor and in trouble.

Bruce's paralyzed and weak body eventually gave out. He died when he was only 31. After the funeral, a good friend of mine who was one of Bruce's caretakers for six years told me he learned more about life from Bruce than from anyone he'd ever known. During the time he lived with Bruce, he saw him in great pain and in poor health, but he kept going and always gave his best. And never once did he hear Bruce complain about anything.

Go 24 hours without complaining.

The "No Complaints" Challenge

I told Bruce's story to my high school students every year since he died in 1972. It was a valuable lesson about the power and freedom we have to choose our attitudes no matter what the circumstances.

I also gave them an assignment called "The Bruce Dioso Memorial Challenge": to go 24 hours without complaining about anything. It took 23 years before I found a

student who could do it. She said:

I just thought of something I should be thankful for every time I started to complain. You know, we have a lot more to be thankful for than we do to complain about.

What Do We Let Into Our Minds?

Our attitude and our whole character are also influenced by what we let into our minds.

Every day of our lives we receive literally thousands of messages from a wide variety of sources. Think of all our choices within these sources:

- **What do I watch on TV?**
- **What do I read?**
- **Which video games do I play?**
- **What do I view on the Internet?**
- **Who do I socialize with?**
- **What kinds of messages do I send and get via social media?**

Zig Ziglar, a motivational speaker and wise author, used to say, "You are what you are because of what goes into your mind." At a conference I once attended, he asked the audience:

Would you allow a person carrying a large bag of trash to walk into your living room and dump it all there?

Obviously, we wouldn't. He then asked a second question:

Would you let anyone dump trash into your mind?

Unfortunately, we often *do* let people and popular culture dump trash into our minds.

Garbage In, Garbage Out

If we allow negative, mean-spirited, and sleazy information into our minds (Garbage In) on a regular basis, we will become a person whose values, words, and actions are negative, mean-spirited, and sleazy (Garbage Out).

For example: A person spends Saturday playing violent video games, viewing pornography on the Internet, and spending time with friends who are angry, negative, and disrespectful. That's a whole day of Garbage In. If this is done on a regular basis, how do think this person will think, talk, and act? Chances are it will be *Garbage In, Garbage Out*.

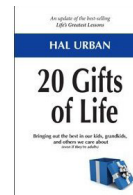
But suppose someone spends Saturday reading good things, watching an uplifting

movie, learning new information on the Internet, and spending time with family and friends in positive conversations. If this is done on a regular basis, how do you think this person will think, talk, and act?

Both research and common sense tell us it will be *Good In, Good Out*. ■

Adapted from 20 Gifts of Life: Bringing Out the Best in Our Kids, Our Grandkids, and Others We Care About by Hal Urban, an award-winning teacher-author. Hal's other books include *Lessons From the Classroom: 20 Things Good Teachers Do* and *Positive Words, Powerful Results*.

(Click on book titles for hot links or go to www.halurban.com.)



Fathers Can Influence Teens' Sexual Behavior

Fathers' attitudes toward teen sex and the emotional closeness of the parent-teen relationship have a sizable influence on adolescent sexual behavior, according to a new review of studies in *Pediatrics* (October, 2012).

The research review found that teens whose fathers disapproved of adolescent sex delayed sexual activity longer. In addition, teens who were emotionally close to their fathers tended to delay sexual activity.

Previous studies have shown that parents who monitor and discipline their teens and communicate with them reduce their teenagers' risk of being involved in sex.

For additional research and resources, go to www.cortland.edu/character and click on **Character-Based Sex Education**. Sample articles:

- ◆ Tom Lickona's "**10 Emotional Dangers of Premature Sexual Involvement**" and "**Tolerance, Diversity, and Respect for Conscience: The Neglected Issue**"
- ◆ Brad Wilcox's "**A Scientific Review of Abstinence and Abstinence Programs**"