The Power of Perception
What you see is what you get…

“The one thing you can’t take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one’s freedoms is to choose one’s attitude in any given circumstance.”

Viktor Frankl, 1905 - 1997

Are you currently feeling stressed or anxious about a certain situation? What if I were to tell you that there is one thing that can transform how you feel about any professional or personal challenge you may be facing? That there is one thing that will not only change how you feel, but can help you achieve a more positive outcome too? That thing is your Perception.

We create our experience of life all day every day. Believe it or not this is also true in regards to the ‘bad’ things that happen to us too. When we are facing difficulties it may feel as though we are out of our control and are at the mercy of external events/people. However we do have some control in these situations and that comes from how we choose to perceive what is happening to us. Our perception governs the meaning we take from a situation (whether it is good or bad for us, a threat or not a threat…) and it is meaning that creates the emotional reaction we have. If we do not perceive something as a threat then it cannot make us feel threatened, can it?

What Viktor Frankl can teach us all…
Viktor Frankl was a renowned Psychotherapist. His revolutionary work focused on the strength people are able to access when facing even the most awful of circumstances, in his own words “…to choose one’s own way.” Viktor was a Holocaust survivor and his experiences during 3 years in concentration camps during World War II, formed his theory that ‘meaning’ is the most important element of human experience. If we can find a meaning, even in the most awful of situations, then we are able to transcend our outlook and subsequently be able to cope far better. Viktor’s theory also shows us that it is the meaning we find in situations which determines whether or not we are a victim of circumstance, or in fact free no matter what is happening to us.

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

What story are you creating?
Think of it as though you are both the Director and Audience of a movie which depicts your life. In the Director’s chair you control the meaning behind everything that happens. As an audience member you react emotionally to this meaning. Where is this true in your life at the moment? What situations are you creating a negative story around? (Director) How is what you are seeing affecting you? (Audience) Does it make you feel good? Bad? Vulnerable?

To explore how powerful our perception can be, can you recall a situation that you worried about for ages only to find that when it actually happened it wasn’t half as bad as you had predicted? With the benefit of hindsight can you now see how the story you created around this situation wasn’t a helpful reflection on reality, but more a version of events tainted by your fears?

Let’s look at this again. Think about the last time you found yourself in a situation which was making you feel extremely stressed. How were you viewing this situation? What meaning did you attach to it? Did the view you took of the situation help or hinder you with finding a solution?
Don’t believe everything you think and feel...

The perception we have around a situation is fuelled by the accompanying thoughts and feelings we have so it is important to gain control over these too. It is far too easy to assume that if we are thinking or feeling a certain way that it must reflect reality. After all, thoughts and feelings can be very convincing! For instance if we think we can’t cope then it must mean we can’t cope. If we think we are not good enough then it must mean that we are not good enough. If we think something poses a threat to us or our happiness then it must be a threat and we need to be on guard!

I would like to encourage you to not believe everything you think and feel. It will be tricky at first but have a go at not taking everything that goes through your mind as ‘fact’. When we are in a situation that is making us feel anxious, just as you would expect the thoughts that arise are fuelled by our fears and insecurities. This slants our perception towards a negative version of events. These kind of thoughts are known in Psychology as deceptive brain messages and the key word here is deceptive, just because we are having negative thoughts does not mean that these thoughts are accurate. Thoughts are just thoughts, ideas or notions that we conjure in our mind as we try to make sense of the world. Depending on how we view and feel about a certain situation will determine whether these ‘notions’ paint a neutral, positive or negative picture of what we see.

Exercise: Good day, bad day?

You are on your way to an important meeting. Traffic is unexpectedly bad so you are running at least 10 to 15 minutes late.

Outlook A

“Oh great, this isn’t going to go well for me this morning I can feel it! I’m going to look so unprofessional when I walk in late. I doubt they’ll take me seriously now. I really wish I didn’t have to go to this meeting. Why do things always go wrong for me?”

Option B

“OK so it’s a little disappointing that I’ll be late but then there’s nothing I can do, it’s just one of those things that happens to everyone occasionally. This isn’t going to get in my way today. I’ll just make my apologies and then carry on, my professionalism and enthusiasm for this project will shine thorough. Things will be fine.”

Q’s:

- Which outlook would help you most in this situation?
- Which outlook would help you enter the meeting with the best frame of mind?
- Which outlook would support you in being able to perform well?
- Which outlook has the potential to make things much worse for you?

So here we can see that in the middle of even the most stressful of situations, we get to choose the type of experience we have by deciding which outlook we are going to take. The next time you feel stressed have a go at pressing pause for a moment and evaluate your perception. Ask yourself, “Is there a better perception of this situation I could choose that would help me?”

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Exercise: Create the best experience possible for the best outcome possible.
Think about a situation that is making you experience stress or anxiety. Let’s explore what type of experience you are currently creating:

- What thoughts fill your mind about this situation?
- What negative conclusions are you making about this situation?
- How are you predicting things will go?
- Are your thoughts and feelings making this situation appear more threatening than it really is?

Take another look…

- How can you view this situation so that you can feel better about it?
- How can this situation actually benefit you in some way?
- What outlook on this situation will help you create the best outcome possible?
- What new meaning will you attach to this situation to help you create the best outcome possible?

Look for and you shall find…
We have all heard the famous saying, ‘Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results.’ Well viewing a situation that you find challenging in the same negative way and expecting to be able to deal with it more effectively will also drive you crazy! Reclaim control over your perception and you will become more resilient to the day to day pressures of life which will increase how effective and happy you are. So remember that no matter what difficult situation you may find yourself in, the one thing that will always support you is your ability to choose your perception.

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