

RETHINKING POSITIVE THINKING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Traditionally, the positive thinking philosophy advocates that you will achieve whatever you want purely by thinking positive thoughts. By rethinking the true meaning of positive thinking for the 21st century, Neil Francis explores different ways of creating new possibilities so that you make the right decisions to live a more balanced, meaningful and contented life.

Neil Francis is the author of *The Entrepreneur's Book* and *Changing Course*.

He is currently the chairman of a digital agency, director of two internet companies, director of a consultancy practice and a trustee of a social enterprise.

"A refreshingly candid book that draws on an engaging personal story to discuss what drives us all and gives us a sense of worth. Being honest, I started by bracing myself for clichés and a bit of a lecture, as so many 'self-help' books have started to look out of touch with reality. But Neil Francis has kept his thoughts and writing firmly on the ground in a way that I thoroughly enjoyed and could easily relate to."

Mark Beaumont, Athlete, Broadcaster, Ambassador
and World Record Holder for Cycling the World

"If you've ever wondered what positive thinking is (and is not), this is the book to read. Neil Francis shows us how to live more meaningful, productive, fulfilling lives. The practical tips and strategies are based on sound scientific theory, not wishy-washy wishful thinking. I highly recommend it."

Dr David Gillespie, Consultant Clinical Neuropsychologist
and Clinical Research Fellow

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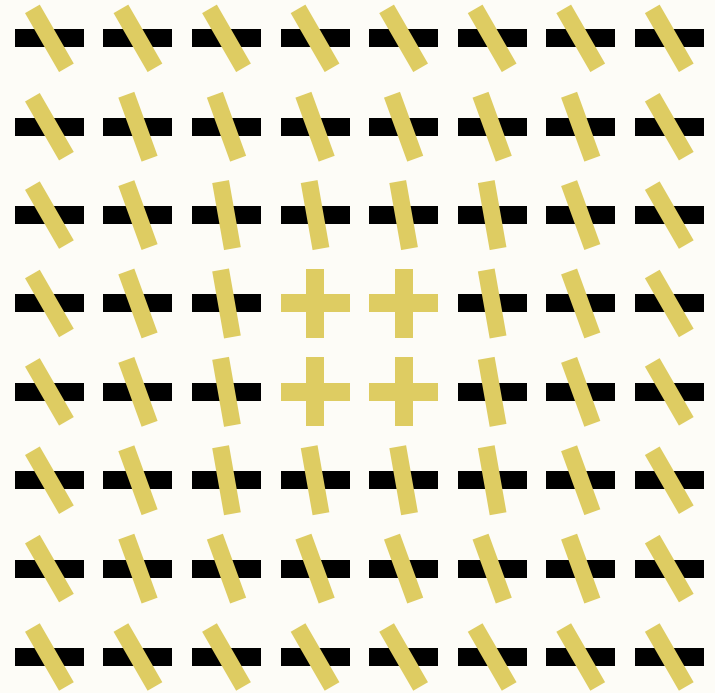
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POSITIVE THINKING

POSITIVE THINKING

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HOW TO CREATE A WORLD
FULL OF POSSIBILITIES



ADVANCE PRAISE

“Neil Francis has faced neurological adversity with remarkable courage, and come through on the other side. His optimism and positive attitude, combined with great determination, shine through every page of *Positive Thinking*, which is a fine testament to his inspirational approach to overcoming cognitive deficits.”

Robert McCrum, Associate Editor of the *Observer*
and Author of *My Year Off: rediscovering life after a stroke*
(Picador)

“This is a fascinating book!

“Neil blends solid research and his own inspiring story to inject every page with hope, positivity and possibility. Few books are game changers – this one may well be.

I will certainly be recommending *Positive Thinking* to my business book club!”

Jill Garrett, Executive coach, consultant
and former European Managing Director
of the Gallup Organization

“In a world that spins faster than ever before, it’s easy to become a spectator of our own lives: wondering what to do, struggling to find the time, feeling overwhelmed.

This pithy, punchy, personal journey digs into the psychology of positivity and will help you find your passion and purpose.”

Professor Andrew Sharman, International consultant
and author *The Wellbeing Book*

“Always engaging and accessible, this book both challenged and reaffirmed aspects of my own journey as a social entrepreneur. It also offered practical advice, based on Neil’s ideas and thoughts about positive thinking, for the road that still lies ahead.”

Chris Wilkins, Co-Founder at
Sporting Memories Network

“Neil’s moving story, insights and advice make this book an enjoyable and engaging read. It’s a valuable tool for anyone who is interested in personal development and achieving their full potential.”

Sally Bibb, Author of *The Strengths Book*
and founder of Engaging Minds

“Neil Francis manages to weave his personal experiences with existing ideas on positive thinking and well-being in an engaging text. Drawing on contemporary examples and practical advice, he offers an opportunity to use positive thinking to capitalize on the possibilities that present themselves while recognizing our own capabilities.”

David Marshall, Professor of Marketing
and Consumer Behaviour,
University of Edinburgh Business School

“Neil weaves together experiences from his business life, his wide-ranging reading and thinking, and inspirational life stories from famous names and personal acquaintances. But what really draws you into this unique book is his honesty and openness about his personal journey following a life-changing stroke and how it has shaped his own positive thinking. The result is an accessible, empathetic, and down-to-earth read which left me feeling good about the world – which was the whole point!”

Tim Walsh, Professor of Critical Care at
the University of Edinburgh and Consultant
in Critical Care, NHS Lothian

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POSITIVE THINKING

HOW TO CREATE A WORLD
FULL OF POSSIBILITIES

NEIL FRANCIS



MADRID | MEXICO CITY | LONDON
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In memory of Becca Henderson
A remarkable, brave and inspirational young woman

TO START, A STORY TO GET YOU IN THE RIGHT MOOD FOR MY BOOK

In a village on the coast of Mexico, an American businessman was standing on the pier when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside his boat were several large yellowfin tunas.

The American complimented the fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked him how long it took to catch them.

“Only a little while,” the Mexican fisherman replied.

The American then asked the man why he didn’t stay out longer and catch more fish. The Mexican said that he caught enough to meet his family’s needs.

“But what do you do with the rest of your time?” the American asked.

“I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take a siesta with my wife, Maria. Each evening I stroll into the village, where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos. I have a full and busy life, señor.”

The American scoffed at this: “I’m a Harvard MBA and I could help you,” he said. “You should spend more time fishing, and with the proceeds, buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from the bigger boat, you could buy several boats. Eventually, you’d

have a fleet of fishing boats, and instead of selling your catch to a middleman you’d sell it directly to the processor.

“Then you could open your own cannery. You’d control the product, processing and distribution. You’d need to leave this small fishing village and move to Mexico City, then on to Los Angeles, and, eventually, to New York City, where you’d run your expanding enterprise.”

“But señor, how long would all this take?” the fisherman asked.

“Fifteen, maybe twenty years,” the American replied.

“But what then, señor?”

The American laughed and said: “That’s the best part. When the time is right, you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public. You’d become very rich. You’d make millions!”

“Then what, señor?”

“Then you’d retire. Move to a small fishing village on the coast, where you’d sleep late, fish a little, play with your grandchildren, take a siesta with your wife. In the evening you could stroll to the village, sip wine and play guitar with your amigos.”

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Finally, and most importantly, my lovely wife Louise, whose help and support made this book become a reality.

INTRODUCTION

MY
STROKE OF
DISCOVERY

Let's start with a statement that might surprise you.

Having a significant stroke at age 41 turned out to be one of the most positive things that has ever happened to me.

Now, this might be a very strange thing to admit, and I can only say it 13 years on from my stroke. But it really has. It has opened up so many possibilities that I can honestly say would not have occurred if I had not had the stroke.

But on 20 October 1996, when I was lying in the stroke ward of the hospital, unable to speak, with my memory in shreds and temporarily blinded in my right eye, it was the worst thing that had ever happened to my family and me. For well over three years it was a very difficult and challenging time for everyone.

So how, you might ask, have I concluded that an event that was horrific initially has now become such a good thing in my life? This event and subsequent challenges have led me to finally understand the power of positive thinking and how to use it in my life. But this is a different type of positive thinking for the 21st century. And used in the right way, I have found it has created many new possibilities in my life. In this book, I am going to share what this type of positive thinking consists of.

Common positive thinking philosophies that have permeated Western society for the last 75 years claim that mere visualization is the key to succeeding and achieving anything that you want. And that the only things that stop you from achieving happiness, good health and wealth are your negative thoughts – and to succeed you must block

or ignore them. This book will provide a different, better and more realistic understanding of positive thinking. But, before I describe the type of positive thinking that I am advocating, it will help to explore where the idea of thinking only positive thoughts and blanking out negative ones comes from, and why some of its core tenets are flawed.

THE POSITIVE THINKING MOVEMENT

In 1937, Napoleon Hill published *Think and Grow Rich*, a book that has reportedly sold over 15 million copies to date. One of the key lessons from this book is that the material universe is governed quite directly by our thoughts. By simply visualizing what you want out of life and thinking positive thoughts, those things and more will be delivered to you – especially if those things involve money. The past few decades have been a profitable era for all sorts of self-help and business success books. Napoleon Hill blazed a trail for an entire industry.

In 1952, Norman Vincent Peale published his book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. His core argument is that by using the power of focus and believing in success you will overcome any obstacles in your life. No matter how insurmountable it may seem, there is no problem in your life that cannot be overcome by the power of positive thinking.

More recently, in 2006, Rhonda Byrne's book, *The Secret*, suggested that you have the ability to be whatever you want to be. And that if you send out good thoughts and intentions to the universe, the universe will give you good things in return. She says positive thoughts attract happiness and, conversely, negative thoughts attract bad decisions and fuel existing worries and negativity. Byrne claims that focused concentration combined with positive thinking will lead to happiness and wealth.

These three authors, and many others, subscribe to basically the same thing – think positive things, visualize the success that will make you happy and wealthy, and you will achieve anything you want.

Now, there is some merit in this type of 'positive thinking' and millions of people have benefited from some of this teaching. For example, in 1960, Napoleon Hill and W. Clement Stone published *Success Through a Positive Mental Attitude*, where they promoted the same idea as Peale. They coined the term 'positive mental attitude' (PMA). Today, there is a lot of scientific evidence from well-respected psychologists and scientists that having a positive mental attitude can provide a wide range of health and emotional benefits.

However, the essence of these approaches is to deceive yourself by denying (or ignoring) reality. They propose that one should block out challenges, and think of and visualize only positive outcomes to solve everything. This means that when you are feeling sad, anxious, depressed or angry, you should intercept all negative thoughts with

positive ones. They advocate repeating affirmations, which are positive statements to help you overcome self-sabotaging and negative thoughts. They claim that by repeating these often, and believing in them, you will start to make positive changes.

There is now much academic and scientific evidence that demonstrates how practising positive thinking in this way can actually be bad for you. Harvard Medical School professor and psychologist Susan David has done a lot of work in this area. In her book, *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change and Thrive in Work and Life*, David argues that forcing positive thoughts won't make you happy.

David claims that avoiding negative emotions by either blocking them or trying to avoid them can do more harm than good. She argues that the idea that somehow people should all be happy, and think happy thoughts, and be positive all the time is antithetical to our real happiness. The reality is that life is fragile, and that you are going to get ill, or that you might lose your job or no longer love your job. And there is a lot of research that supports the view that people who strive to be happy actually, over time, become unhappy.

In 2014 Gabriele Oettingen, Professor of Psychology at New York University and the University of Hamburg, published her book, *Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of Motivation*. Oettingen's research showed that in the short term positive thinking is beneficial, but over long periods of time it saps motivation, prevents us from achieving our goals, and leaves us feeling frustrated and stuck.

RETHINKING 'POSITIVE THINKING'

To really move ahead in life, we need to engage with the world and feel energized – we need to go beyond positive thinking and face the obstacles that stand in our way.

Furthermore, over the last 20 years or so, a new branch of psychology has emerged; 'positive psychology'. It originated out of the University of Pennsylvania with Martin Seligman, who is a professor of psychology. Since it began in 1998, thousands of new research articles and books on the subject have been written, several new academic journals have been published and an international professional association, the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA), was established.

In essence, positive psychology is the study of what makes life worth living. To push this description further, positive psychology is a scientific approach to studying human thoughts, feelings and behaviour with a focus on strengths as well as weaknesses. It advocates building up the good in life while repairing the bad, and developing the lives of ordinary people to be better, while making those who are struggling more fulfilled.

I am not suggesting that the phrase 'positive thinking' should be banished to the annals of history. Rather, we need to rethink what the term really means and reclaim it for the 21st century. With the right definition, understanding and practice, positive thinking can help individuals develop a strong mechanism to cope better with the challenges and maximize on the possibilities that life throws at us all.

The definition I believe to be true and will promote in this book is as follows:

Positive thinking is about creating possibilities, and then being better able to assess which ones are realistic and achievable.

It means being proactive with possibilities that could enrich you. Equally, it means being reactive to those possibilities that might harm you. Thinking positively allows you to assess the risk and the rewards of any possibilities (good or bad) that you are faced with, allowing you to make sensible decisions and develop strategies to cope with them.

When understood from this perspective, positive thinking will help you to make the right decisions and live a more balanced, meaningful and contented life. The positive

psychology movement and some of its ideas have been instrumental in helping me to rethink the true meaning of positive thinking that I am promoting here.

Before we start, and for clarity, it is important that I explain the difference between possibility and opportunity, as they have two very distinct meanings, yet they are frequently interchanged in their usage. A ‘possibility’ implies that something can happen – because you or external circumstances may cause it to happen. An ‘opportunity’ implies that something is available within boundaries and should be seized. Possibilities – more so than opportunities – can be self-managed because when presented with a possibility it is up to the individual whether to make it happen or not. However, an opportunity depends on circumstances available at the time.

This is the essence of this book and the first step to thinking positively in order to open yourself up to new possibilities. You will be introduced to a wide range of people in these pages. If you have read my other books, you will see that I have had an interesting life so far! CEO of a successful web development company for ten years, suffering a stroke at the age of 41, then becoming a caddie to help my recovery, and now an author of three books and director of two digital agencies – a social enterprise and a consultancy practice. Through all these roles, I have met and worked with many CEOs, marketing managers, authors, artists, digital managers, charity bosses and entrepreneurs.

Also, I have come across people I have never met but who have inspired me: an uplifting TED Talk; a memorable

YouTube speech; a successful sportsperson; a Netflix documentary; and so on.

All these individuals have helped me to think outside the box – to think more creatively – which has allowed me to get a different perspective and rethink positive thinking. That then led me to discover the key themes that I will share in this book, to help you unlock new possibilities in your life. That is why the book is split into two parts, *Rethinking positive thinking* and *Opening yourself to new possibilities*.

Through their stories and my own experiences, I am going to explore what these themes are. In each chapter I will share a story, and identify, explore and expand upon a key theme. Part 1 covers the themes of acceptance, purpose, mindset, optimism, strengths, choices, gratitude, negativity, failure and resilience. In Part 2, I focus on values, imagination, dreaming, creativity, goals, identity and emotions. By thinking positively about these core themes and acting on the ideas, insights and thoughts highlighted in each chapter, you will find a different but a very rewarding, type of positive thinking that will help you to open yourself up to new possibilities.

For nine years now I have been using this type of positive thinking, which I am convinced has instigated the presentation of numerous possibilities in both my professional and my personal lives. That is why I came to the conclusion that having a stroke was one of the most positive things that has ever happened to me.

So, let’s begin with the person who helped me start the journey that led to the rethinking of positive thinking for the 21st century.

PART 1

RETHINKING
POSITIVE
THINKING

CHAPTER 1

ACCEPTING YOUR ‘NOW’

ACCEPTANCE

‘Basically, you are f...d’

My neuropsychologist didn’t say those exact words, but that’s how it felt. Here I was, 18 months on from my stroke, with Dr David Gillespie, as he tried to explain that the damage caused by the stroke meant that I could never be a CEO again.

Yes, I was fully aware that I still had significant issues with speech and memory. However, I was clinging to the idea that one day I would be able to return to the job I loved. And that was what we were talking about, in my counselling session, when he uttered those ‘words’ (which he did not exactly say!). They stopped me in my tracks.

The session had started well. I told David about the progress I felt I had achieved since our last meeting. Then,

as normal, David asked me what was on my mind and what I wanted to talk about. The burning issue, I told him, that had consumed my thoughts recently was just how much I was missing my old life, pre-stroke, as the CEO of a web development company.

In his gentle and calm way, David then explained again (probably for the tenth time over the last 18 months) why returning to my role as CEO was not going to be possible. But this time he explained it slightly differently – and this explanation was the spark that led to this book and so many other positive things in my life.

“Do you want to know what is going on, Neil?” David said. “You are grieving. You are grieving for a part of Neil that died when you had your stroke. Part of your brain was irrevocably damaged – you no longer have the cognitive skills required to run a company. Therefore, you are in a state of grieving for the life you had pre-stroke – the CEO life.”

I looked at him and burst into tears!

He was right – I was grieving, and I hated what the stroke had done to me and my family. David then went on to explain that grieving is a process, with a number of stages. He had seen me go through this over the last 18 months. I had spells where I was sad or lonely or anxious or in denial, or angry or confused or frustrated. But then he said this:

“One day, if we continue to work together on it, you hopefully will get to **acceptance**.”

And that was the spark. It was a spark that developed into a mindset, which about nine months later allowed me to finally accept my stroke and everything it had left me with.

I accepted that, yes, I had permanent brain damage and I was a stroke survivor but that was OK. And, crucially, I accepted that I would never be a CEO again, and that also was OK.

Once I had accepted what had happened and how I was, new possibilities started to open up in my life.

IT STARTS HERE



This, in my opinion, is the starting point for positive thinking – acceptance. On paper, accepting the reality of where you are in life sounds like it should be easy. But it is not. As I found out, it took me nearly three years to accept the fact that I would not be a CEO again. During that time, I was either in denial, or trying to convince myself that my damaged brain would miraculously heal itself.

And I think many people could also be in a similar situation, but they don't need to go through a life-threatening event to experience it. For whatever reason, people may be 'stuck' with a view of their life that is stopping them from progressing or finding new possibilities. It might be that they have ideas about setting up a new business or writing a book or moving to another country, and for one reason or another they do nothing, convinced that it is not possible. Or they regret a decision that they have made in the past

which has taken them on a path ending up in an unfulfilling job. They believe it is not possible to change that path.

Whatever it is, and whatever you have been through, the starting point to opening yourself up to new possibilities is to *accept* whatever situation you find yourself in.

This is your 'now' – the reality of your life as it currently is.

You might be consumed with anger or regret, so you may be blaming fate, or your poor decisions, or your boss or colleagues, or your loved ones, but whatever it is you just need to stop and accept where you are. When you accept your 'now', you will find a huge weight has been lifted from your shoulders. I realize that this will be incredibly difficult for some people but the only alternative is to keep the status quo and therefore never really move forward in life.

All of this was a result of finally accepting my 'now'. This is the first step: you need to accept what life has thrown at you – good or bad. This is not easy and may not happen straight away. It took me about nine months from that session with David to accept everything about the stroke and its aftermath. For some, it might take longer while for others it might be much quicker. But if you really want to open yourself up to new possibilities, then first you have to accept where you are in life.

Once I totally accepted the stroke and the limitations it had left me with, I was able to allow regret and bitterness to fall away. In fact, the more I accepted it the more I started to see positive things coming from it. This was because I started to 'see' new possibilities – possibilities that I could not see when I was in denial about the reality of my stroke.

TRY TO STOP LOOKING
BACK ON YOUR LIFE
AND INSTEAD LOOK
FORWARD POSITIVELY
AND CREATE A
NEW HISTORY
FOR YOURSELF.

A DIFFERENT HISTORY

Several years ago I attended an event where the Irish journalist Fergal Keane was talking about his life and his recently published autobiography, *All of These People*. I have always admired him as a journalist – over the years he has reported extensively from many locations around the world including Bosnia, South Africa, Ireland and Rwanda.

That evening, Keane was very open about his personal life. His father was an alcoholic and that eventually killed him. Like his father, he too was an alcoholic. He fought an intense personal battle against alcohol, and struggled with anxiety and depression which all lasted for many years.

During those years he successfully hid his alcoholism from his friends and his employer, the BBC. However, the fear of being found out, perhaps losing his job, and the effects this would have on his family forced him to finally seek help. “I only told the Beeb when the crunch point came,” he recalls. “I came back from a trip to Spain and I called my direct boss and explained that I was in real trouble, and needed some time off.”

That call led him to meeting someone who showed him a way out of drinking. He stopped drinking in June 1999 and has not had a drink since. In the early days of his sobriety he was told by a counsellor that he had a chance to stop the cycle of alcoholism that had plagued

his family. He did not need to die like his father had, from alcoholism. Crucially, the counsellor told him that he did not need to pass on his unhappiness to his son. And then the counsellor said this to him:

The history can stop here and now. It can become a different history.

That statement is positive thinking in action. Accept and acknowledge the difficulties and challenges that you have faced so far in your life. Then try to stop looking back on your life and instead look forward positively and create a new history for yourself.

The first step after having accepted your 'now' is to discover your purpose. And to help you do so, I want to introduce you to Kari in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

DISCOVERING MEANING

PURPOSE

To explore the effects of 'purpose' on positive thinking I want to share the story of a remarkable young woman called Kari Spence. Now 27 years old, Kari embodies probably one of the most important aspects of thinking positively.

In 2009, aged 18, Kari got the opportunity to travel to Rwanda with a group of 15 other young people from a local youth club. The aim of the trip was to help build a playground for a school in Kigali, Rwanda's capital city. For Kari, this was a life-changing experience. She completely fell in love with the country and the people, and she knew with certainty she wanted to return to Rwanda.

Then, in 2010, Kari deferred her entry to study physical education teaching at university in the UK and headed back

to Rwanda. For three months she lived in a rural village with a local family and lived the life of a local Rwandan. She ate traditional Rwandan food, and lived with limited water in a house that had no electricity. She volunteered at the local school, where she taught English and introduced different sports to primary pupils.

During this trip Kari was taken to another small rural village, Gako, around an hour's drive from the capital, to visit Faith and Hope Primary School. When she arrived at the school she was shocked at how many pupils were squeezed into one classroom, how few school supplies they had, and how dirty and malnourished the pupils were. She immediately knew this was where she could make a huge difference.

After that, Kari made two trips a year to the school, working closely with the teachers, particularly developing their physical education and health and wellbeing programmes. Six years on from her first trip to Rwanda, Kari founded the charity 'Together in Sport Rwanda' (TiSR). Over the years TiSR has set up and run a variety of different projects directly helping improve the lives of 500 children in the Faith and Hope community.

The projects are many and varied. For example, there is the 'Friends of Faith and Hope' programme, where donors contribute monthly to a general fund for buying school supplies, paying toward the entire school's health insurance and a crisis fund that helps families identified as having the most hardship.

Additionally, in 2015 Kari put out an appeal on social media to raise money to build the first kitchen for the school

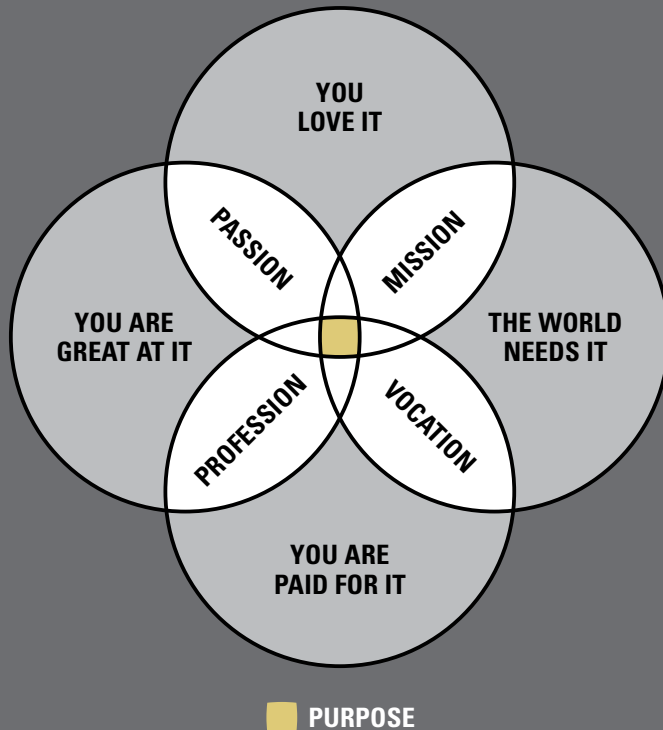
– it was a huge success. 'The Food Programme', which aims to provide every child attending school with one hot meal per day, was introduced in the spring of 2016, following the completion of the kitchen.

I helped Kari when she was starting the TiSR project and had a catch-up meeting with her before December 2018. As ever, she was positive about TiSR and the work the charity was doing. And, she informed me that she was moving to Rwanda to be a teacher and work on the TiSR project permanently in January 2019.

She explained, "I love the country and its people, because of their enthusiasm and attitude toward life. Even with the very little the children have they are the happiest and most resilient children I have been lucky to work alongside. When I first went to Rwanda it changed my outlook on life; the work I do for the charity, it doesn't feel like work because I get so much enjoyment, positivity and inspiration from the people I'm working with. Rwanda and this charity have given my life purpose and meaning, and I'm excited about what the future holds."

The word '**purpose**' summarizes perfectly why Kari embodies such an important aspect of positive thinking.

WHY IS PURPOSE SO IMPORTANT?



Identifying ‘purpose’ provides you with a stable foundation and a sense of direction, both of which are integral to a positive outlook on life. A solid foundation allows you to be more resilient and bounce back from adversity. A sense of direction allows you to set goals.

For some, purpose is connected to their occupation – meaningful, satisfying work. For others, their purpose is connected to responsibilities to their family or friends. Others seek purpose through spirituality or religious beliefs. Some people may find their purpose clearly expressed in all these aspects of life. Wherever it is and where you find it, purpose can guide life decisions, influence behaviour, shape goals, offer a sense of direction and create meaning.

Purpose will be unique for everyone; what you identify as your path will be different from other people’s. What’s more, your purpose can actually shift and change throughout life in response to the evolving priorities and fluctuations of your own experiences.

One of the best descriptions of purpose came from Dan Buettner, a *National Geographic* Fellow and *New York Times* bestselling author. In 2009, Buettner gave a TED Talk titled, “How to Live to Be 100+”. He talked about his research on the world’s Blue Zones. These are areas where people live inordinately long, healthy lives. The Blue Zone

with the longest disability-free life expectancy in the world is the Japanese island of Okinawa and its surrounding islands. In this region, people routinely live beyond 100 years of age. And at this age, they are still physically capable, fully alert and involved in the community around them. They work in their gardens and play with their great-grandchildren, and when they die it generally happens quickly and in their sleep. Their rates of disease are many times lower than those in much of the rest of the world.

Interestingly, Okinawans don't have a word for retirement. What they have is *ikigai*, which roughly translated means 'passion' or 'reason for living'. When he conducted his study with the Okinawans, one of the questions in Buettner's questionnaire was, "What is your *ikigai*?" Nearly all of the people were able to answer immediately. For a 102-year-old karate master, his *ikigai* was to teach his martial art. For a 100-year-old fisherman, it was bringing fish back to his family three days a week. For a 102-year-old woman, it was to spend time with her great-great-granddaughter. These were their 'reasons for living' – their *ikigai*; their purpose.

Thinking positively will help you find your *ikigai* – your purpose.

Identifying your purpose is crucial for thinking positively. A good starting point for this is the answers to these four simple but thought-provoking questions:

1. What do you love?

The answer to this is your passion.

2. What are you good at?

The answer to this is your mission.

3. What can you be paid for?

The answer to this is your profession.

4. What does the world need?

The answer to this is your talent.

If you can answer those four questions, then you have probably identified your current purpose, your *ikigai*.

GET INTO YOUR TIME MACHINE

If you are currently struggling to find direction and your purpose in life, then imagine jumping into a time machine and arriving at the year you turn 75. Then, ask yourself these five questions:

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1. How, and for what, do I want to be remembered?
 2. By whom do I want to be remembered?
 3. Which achievements and personal strengths do I want others to talk about?
 4. When I look back on the life I have lived, am I satisfied with it?
 5. Am I living the life today that will mean that I achieve this when I am 75?
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The answer to these questions should help you to identify whether you are living according to your values, whether you are achieving your goals and whether your life is going in the direction you want it to. Importantly, if you answered ‘no’ to questions 4 and 5, then think about the changes you can make to ensure that you are heading in the right direction. This direction will help you achieve your goals, so that you can look back on a life well lived

when you are 75. Make sure these changes are realistic and within your control.

Now, this is the crucial bit. Write down your answers and look at them in six months or a year to see if you have made progress toward achieving your goals. If you feel you are drifting off track, then remember the 75-year-old version of you and revise your goals as you learn more about yourself and the person you really want to be. All of this will not happen overnight, but it is a gradual realization that takes place over time.

Many people find that thinking about their life’s purpose seems too abstract or uncomfortable. If you are not a spiritual person and don’t believe in some higher order of things, thinking about the purpose of your life can seem airy-fairy. For others, it can be very difficult and painful to face the way you have lived your life so far. If you are in either or both of these situations, don’t worry – many other people are in the same boat.

But don’t underestimate the benefit of believing that you are making a difference in some way, and that your life has purpose. This is an important part of thinking positively and it is fundamental to your wellbeing. Kari Spence’s story is testament to this because once she found a purpose, her life became enriched and, at the same time, the lives of the children she works with in Rwanda were enriched. For me, Kari’s story also demonstrates the power of positive thinking.