



How to Be Positive ... When Things Suck

Kathrien Ahn

Most of my days and nights for the past 20-some years of my life have been spent struggling—whether it be personally or professionally. In the past, because I was immature and so caught up in the difficulty of every moment, I didn't have much to say to the world. But getting older does have its benefits, most namely the gaining of wisdom, and I've found that that I now do have something to say. So, here's my two cents.

Life is unfair.

You have a choice to bitch about it or figure out how to take the next step. I grew up in a working class family in the city of (and outskirts of) Philadelphia and had to work at my parents' hip-hop clothing store in the Germantown area on Saturdays. The store was called Street Blue and I hated it. I hated the store, hated the fact that I had to help my parents, but most of all, I hated the fact that I was never sure if the store would make enough money. These were big thoughts for a 10 year old, and I would compare my parents to the parents of my friends who had more money, stable jobs, and most importantly, didn't make their kids go work at a store on Saturdays. Looking back, I think about what a huge brat I was. Seriously. My parents gave up everything for my brother and I so we could have a better life in America. And, here I was, complaining because I had to help them out. The point is, when you're going through a tough or unfair situation, think of it as an exercise in patience-building. Or, I guess you could become another Negative Nancy or Norm. The choice is up to you.

Don't compare yourself to others.

I believe that competitive juices begin to flow when you begin breathing. But it might have been awakened during a Little League tee ball game, when your parents compared your hitting to another player. And then it probably slowly progressed to the point that you were comparing yourself and your achievements to those of your friends and colleagues.

My high school experience was pretty competitive, and the students in my Advanced Placement classes would be ruthless in their quest for the top grades and the possibility to be Valedictorians. I've never been particularly book smart, and had to work twice as hard to maintain my grades. My AP Calculus teacher, whom I am still fond of, would always be patient with me—even when I had to stay after school every day because I didn't understand Calculus. In the beginning, I thought he was going to hate me, but he never complained and was always helpful.

I'd compare myself to my fellow classmates who never had to study and still managed to ace the tests. It would be really hard on me and I would get extremely down on myself. One day, after receiving a not-so-great score on an exam, he took me aside and told me that the only person I should ever compete with is myself. It's something that I have to remind myself of everyday, but it stuck. Thank God.

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Accept yourself for who you are.

Cheesy as it sounds, it's the one thing that will keep you sane... and positive. My whole life, I've tried to be someone else (hence the entry into the world of acting and writing). I've tried to be someone prettier, smarter, better at sports, better at Science, a person who not only wanted to be Valedictorian but also aced the AP exams, was captain of all the sports teams, volunteered, was homecoming queen, and oh yeah... had to date the hot jock at school. Then I went to college at New York University and was enthralled by the craziness and diversity of the city. There were downtown hipsters, people from the Midwest, the Uptown trust fund kids, the kids from places as far as the United Arab Emirates, China, Brazil, and Denmark. Everyone had their own unique style and life experience that they brought to this hectic city, and I thrived on it. As tough as a city New York can be, it's the place that taught me to accept myself for who I am—the good and the bad. (Now, that doesn't mean you have to move to NYC to accept yourself or that everyone's going to roll up and be your friend if you do. They probably won't, but they'll be honest with you about it. Hey, it is a tough city).

**Don't find happiness in material things which break, tear, rip, get old and defunct, stretch out, and fade.
Invest in what people can't take away, your heart and brain.**

Maybe its life as a whole or just circumstance, but very rarely do things always go your way. Life has its ups and downs, but one thing is for certain—you can't predict anything that's going to happen. I had a co-worker who was the type of girl who had to control EVERYTHING. From the amount of sugar she puts in her coffee to the salary that her prospective boyfriend had to make in order for her to consider going out with him. She also rang up a \$40,000 credit card debt solely for her love of Marc Jacobs and Chloe dresses. Granted, the girl has an amazing wardrobe, but she would tell me that she was constantly unhappy with her life (Think Confessions of a Shopaholic). I'm definitely not perfect, but she taught me that you really have to find happiness in things that aren't so fleeting. That might be love, relationships, intellectual pursuits, figuring out your talents or focusing on helping others. We all have different paths, so the sooner you find yours, the happier you'll be.

Don't listen to people who drink Haterade on a daily basis.

I used to be that type of person that needed everyone to like me. You know... that person that needs constant assurance that they're doing the right thing and following the right path. All it did, though, was make me a miserable person. You really can't make everyone like you. Even Will Smith has a few haters, and why would ANYONE hate on him? Once I started focusing on being a positive person and doing the things that made me happy, I started thinking less about what other people thought. It's the opposite of high school, when popularity seemed so important. The point is that if you put good vibes out into the world, they'll eventually make their way back to you. And people who put out negative vibes usually get back the same. Don't be like them.

Find your escape.

I love music and singing, and have ever since I was about 5 years old and would sing along to anyone and everything on MTV. And that trend hasn't changed too much, as music, singing and karaoke are ways in which I de-stress from the many harsh realities of life.

I'm not the type of person that compares my problems to those of everyone else, because I believe that at the end of the day, your problems are just that—your own, and you have to deal with them. But over the years, I've learned how to deal with stressful situations and difficulties by having an escape—real-life padding—so that problems can become slightly more bearable.

When I was struggling in NYC, starting my career, there were many days/nights when I felt as though I was completely lost because I had this huge dream, but didn't know how to get there. My friends from school were in stable careers in the world of Finance, and I was broke, barely able to pay rent and living off of Balance bars and coffee (I don't recommend this, as it's not very healthy). But I always had music and at the time, I used a beat-up CD player and would walk from internship to job to apartment to auditions, listening to Bach, Jay-Z, 2Pac and whatever else I had. To this day, whenever life throws me a hardball, I don't freak out (usually). Instead, I put on my headphones and zone out... Think... Re-strategize my life, relax my brain And regain my sanity.

The point is that we all have problems (DUH), but the hard part is learning how to deal with them in a constructive way. Sure, you can do a bunch of negative, damaging things to yourself, your body, and your brain in order to escape, but one day you'll have to wake up and face the world and all of those pesky problems. You might as well start now, so find an escape that helps you cope. You'll get stronger, so when new issues or problems arise, you'll be more equipped to deal with them in a positive manner.

Make time for love, friends, and family.

They'll be the ones who will be there for you when everything else fades. Your job or your bank account won't feed you soup when you're fighting a cold or will pick you up on the side of the road when your car engine breaks down. Just sayin'.

I grew up with a loving, working-class family that has been fraught with financial problems for most of my adult life—which is definitely what has been my driving force in life to succeed. During middle and high school, I wasn't the smartest kid, but I tried the hardest—usually putting friends and family after my studies. This trend continued throughout college and my early 20's as I put career success and work before any other aspect of my life, bypassing friends' birthdays, weddings, gatherings, sports events and travel excursions. I basically sacrificed my relationships with others in order to pursue my career goals and, yes, there have been benefits, but there are also a ton of drawbacks. I realize now that life is all about give and take, not just how much money you have in your bank account, or if you booked a guest-star role on that TV show. At such pivotal moments in my life, I was alone not because I didn't have friends or loved ones, but because I chose to be. And it didn't feel good—at all. These days, I'm trying to repair broken relationships and do my best to keep my relationships with others in a positive place, because there's really nothing like being around a bunch of people who care about you. The only way you'll have that is if you spend time with others and give OF yourself to them and others around you. With love, you get what you give. Enough said on that topic.

At the end of the day, your problems
are just that—your own.

Being broke sucks, so just deal with your finances accordingly.

Meaning don't spend all your money on the latest gadgets and Jimmy Choos. Do something called saving.

It seems as though we're hearing "In this Economy..." as a preface to every sentence we hear, whether it's the news, websites, blogs, or even coffee shop conversation. The majority of us are affected by this current recession, including myself. With that said, when life deals you these circumstances, you have to deal with the situation. So, I budget. I pack my lunch, put together cool outfits from vintage shops and H&M, but more than anything, I started to see how little I actually need. I know, I know... (Collective GROAN) We all want cool shit. Gadgets, Designer clothing, expensive trinkets, hot cars, etc. But, at the end of the day, figure what what you *need* instead of only chasing after what you *want*. Want is a whole other beast that can never be satiated, if you know what I mean.

If you don't feel positive, just fake it for a minute... after a while it becomes second nature. If people find you annoyingly positive, congratulations—you've succeeded.

I know tons of jaded, negative, snarky people in real life. I have read their blogs and seen their YouTube videos online. And, do I laugh? Yes—probably because I was one of them for a long time. I used to bitch and complain about everything that didn't go my way or I thought was unfair. And what happened? People didn't want to be around me because I was negative. I didn't want to be around myself either to be honest.

But then, through church and other volunteer networks, I started meeting people who had really difficult lives. These people had real problems and didn't have anywhere/anyone to turn to, but they

were constantly smiling the kind of smiles that stretched from ear to ear and emanated a kind of warmth that rivaled the Sun. And I was stunned. How could these people who had been through really tough times still have the energy and positivity to smile? And I realized that I needed to change. I needed to just try and see the positives, or see the glass as being half-full.

At the end of the day, figure out what you need instead of only chasing after what you want.

Bigots aren't positive people and you can't get rid of them. But you don't have to become one.

Bigots are like cockroaches. They'll outlast a nuclear explosion. Okay, well, maybe not literally. As I said, I grew in Philadelphia, and being Asian-American, was subject to racism and discrimination at times. I never knew how to deal with it, which is why I loved writing, reading, and singing. It's how I dealt with life and its hardships. I heard a lot of bigots say awful things. The truth is that a lot of them spew negativity in a way that makes you understand that it's not you, it's them. That doesn't mean that it doesn't piss me off when I hear racist comments or ignorant words, but you just have to pick your battles. The truth is, you can't argue with a bigot, you can only pity him/her.

The Wall of Disappointment is like death or taxes. It will always be there to block your path. Figure out how to climb it.

Gotta love the “Wall of Disappointment,” which is that thing that blocks your initial hopes, dreams and goals. When you’re starting out with your endeavors, it just stands in front of you refusing to budge as if saying, “Dude, you think you can get by me? You can’t do anything! You suck, so just give up now and save yourself the humiliation.” And when you hit this wall, you probably think about giving up and going back to the “safe” goals that society has laid down for you. You look up at that huge concrete wall and think, “Maybe this stupid wall is right. Maybe I really am a fool for coming up with this idea and trying to follow through with it.” WRONG. That wall was put there for a reason, which is to let you know that you’re not ready for your dream yet. Nope. You’re not ready until you prepare, try, fail, try, fail again, ask people what you’re doing wrong, ask people if you’re crazy, wonder if you really are crazy, and then try it again and again. Don’t let this wall deter you from going after what you really want. If you fail, get your ass up and figure out how to climb that wall.

What other people think has absolutely nothing to do with you.

If people are negative and snarky, just ignore them. You have bigger fish to fry on your path to world domination. I’ve never really had anyone believe in or support me when I embarked on my dream to act and write in Hollywood. Most people just looked at me with pity or annoyance in their eyes and finished it off with a sarcastic, snarky comment. In the beginning, it used to bug me to the point where I thought seriously about giving up and just doing what everyone else was doing; the 9 to 5, the safe route.

But then, one day I took a long, hard look at the people that were the most negative, and saw that they had one thing in common. They are all miserable—seriously miserable. And I realized that they're miserable because they never took the leap to follow their dreams and hate you for doing so. In order to be positive, you have to follow your heart, dreams, and goals, or there is a huge possibility that you'll become like these people who constantly criticize others and find fault with everyone and everything. Most people who are doing what they want to be doing are, for the most part, not negative people. They're too busy doing what they love.

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Laugh at something stupid for 5 minutes each day.

There was a time that I was auditioning in New York City and would audition for roles like, “Asian girl 2,” “Exotic Temptress” or “Asian Nail Salon Girl,” and would leave the casting director's offices and think, “Wow. I graduated from NYU cum laude to do this?” I didn't realize that people really seemed to view me as a stereotype. At first, I'd get really mad and talk to my agent about submitting me for better roles, and she'd say, “Hon, that's your 'type.' You have to do these roles because that's the way they see you. That's reality.” I thought she was full of it, and instead would go into auditions and my one goal was to make the casting director laugh. It got to the point where she would stop the camera and say, “You know that you need an accent, right?” But I'd do the part again and she'd laugh. I never got any of these roles—thankfully, because I didn't want them—but I achieved my goal of making this woman laugh, and that's when I really understood the power of laughter. This is also when I learned how to write, which is a powerful medium in and of itself.

Expect nothing, but dream big. You never know what will happen.

When I was 10 years old, I used to take my shampoo bottle out and pretend that I was receiving a Grammy award for best Pop/R&B performance, thanking the Academy, Puff Daddy, and 2pac. That's the beauty of innocence in childhood. You completely block out reality and just live with your heart and dreams. Now, we all know that reality is a tad more difficult, but that doesn't mean that you have to give everything up. Being positive goes hand in hand with keeping your dreams and hope alive. As I write this, we have an African-American President of the United States. Would this have been possible 40 years ago? Hell no. But do you think that people across this nation and world stopped believing that, someday, it could be? The point is that you have to keep the dream alive, believe in change, believe that all things are possible, because you really don't know what will happen. Positive people have one thing in common—hope. Hope that good things will happen. You gotta keep it going.

Be grateful.

You know when your parents start with, “Well, when I was young...” And you promptly roll your eyes, zone out, and think about what you're going to wear when you go out. If you take time to actually LISTEN to them, you'll find that they actually know a thing or two. Life can throw you a sucker punch or two, and if you don't know how to deal with it, most of us go the negative route—complain, be angry and resort to drugs or alcohol to solve the problem. The truth is that we all have problems, but every single one of us on this earth has something to be grateful for. This is something I have to remind myself of everyday—when my career goals seem to be at a standstill, a guy breaks my heart, or if I don't know exactly how I'm going to take care of my parents. I have to step back and think something like, “Well, I had this really great cup of coffee today.” Cheesy I know, but hey, it works for me.

Dig deep, find your talent, and dream big.

Now it's up to you to put the work in. Sometimes life comes up from behind you and kicks you in the ass, which is how it tells you that you're supposed to be moving in an entirely different direction. Maybe you're fighting a losing battle in a relationship or career. Maybe you've neglected your health, and its coming back to haunt you. Whatever it is, we're all born with talents, and some of us have chosen to pursue them and some have preferred to stay in the "Safe" zone. In tough times, you have to dig deep because all the extraneous layers are stripped away and you're faced with a decision. Go for it or not? **It's up to you.** 📌

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathrien Ahn is an optimist who definitely struggles to remain positive at times. Originally from Philly, she went to New York University to study Journalism and Economics before realizing that the crazy world of Entertainment was her calling. After many auditions for Asian nail salon-specific roles, a part on *Law and Order: SVU*, and taking some screenwriting classes, she made her way to Los Angeles. Since being there, she's had numerous jobs, a part on NBC's *The Office*, wrote several screenplays, and become the Community Manager of docstoc.com. She is currently the editor of an online magazine, twirlit. She is also a hip hop karaoke fiend and thinks rap music is the best thing ever. You can keep up with her on [her blog](#).

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