

# ***Please Try This at Home***

## ***Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life***

### **The Magic of Maybe**

I've got two magic words for you. Door opening words like “open sesame.” Only these two words open the door to a prison in the mind. But before we can find the door, let's take a peek at the prison we're escaping.

Most of us have a “top 40 radio station” of thoughts that run through our heads when things are not going as we'd like. The tunes in this station are made up of explicit or implicit messages we've heard along the way or that we fear may be true about ourselves. When something bad happens, that mental radio turns on and plays these horrible messages. For example, you find out that you weren't invited to a friend's party and suddenly the radio is playing *It's Because You Aren't Interesting*, followed by *You'll Always Be Excluded*, and the techno version of *You're Gonna End Up Totally Alone*. Or say you don't get hired for a job you wanted. Again, the volume turns up in time for the last few bars of *Your Best Isn't Good Enough*. The song set continues with *You'll Always Be a Screw Up* and finishes with that great ballad *Don't You Realize by Now You'll Never Amount to Anything?*

As if hearing these mental messages when things go wrong weren't enough, some of us have to put up with them when good things happen as well. You get admitted to the school of your choice and *If They Only Knew the Real You They'd Kick You Out* starts to play, followed by *You're the Admission Office's Mistake* and *What Makes You Think You'll Succeed When No One in Your Family Ever Has?* Or you finally start dating someone who doesn't make you feel like boxed wine in a Dixie cup and the radio blares *Any Day Now They'll Leave You* and *It's Just Too Good to Be True*.

### **Absolut Attribution: The Imprisoning Vodka**

There are three “absolute” themes you might have noticed in the song list above that may appear in your personal Top 40 as well. First, the song titles tend to be global and pervasive, rather than specific, containing words like always, totally, never, no one, ever, and too. In addition to being global, these words also imply permanence, rather than the possibility for change. These “songs” also focus on flaws in who we are as people, rather than on the particular circumstances we are in: *you* aren't interesting, *your* best isn't good enough, *you're* the mistake, *you'll* never amount to anything.

These three elements—pervasiveness, permanence, and person-focus—provide the walls of our thought prisons. If who we are as people is flawed and it will be that way in every situation from here to eternity, what logical person would not lean toward anxiety and depression? Being forever flawed without exception is, in fact, depressing!

So how do we get out of this prison? By hammering small wedges of uncertainty into our absolute messages, effectively changing our mental “radio station.” This is where we get to use the two magic words of “or maybe.” We answer our negative recurring thoughts with a triple

threat combination of possibilities that disrupt the three absolutes: specificity, changeability, and circumstance-focus.

So when you find out you weren't invited to the party and the radio starts playing that flawed person-focused tune *It's Because You Aren't Interesting*, your circumstance-focused answer "song" could be *Or Maybe...My Friend Knows I Won't Like the People at This Party*. When you didn't get the job and the permanent song *You'll Always Be a Screw Up* kicks on, you can answer with your own changeable ballad: *Or Maybe...I'll Get the Next Job and It Will Be Better Than This One*. Your answer to the pervasive song *It's Just Too Good to Be True* about that new loving relationship could be the specific song *Or Maybe...I've Learned from Past Hurts and This Time Will Be Different*.

Now I'm not recommending that we pretend hard things don't happen or assume that when things go well, they always will. I'm just saying that we can capitalize on the very uncertainty in life that often gives us so much trouble. Since we don't know the future, we can use the unknowing of "or maybe" to create possibility doors that allow us to wriggle out of some unnecessary depression and anxiety that results from absolute thinking.

## 6 Steps toward Making Uncertainty Work for You

If you suspect that the absolutes in your recurring thoughts are giving you more than your fair share of anxiety and depression, you might try the following:

1. Start by jotting down the song titles of your personal Top 40—those negative messages that repeat in your head after good or bad events occur.
2. For each recurring thought you write down, see if you can identify any absolutes of pervasiveness, permanence, or flawed personality-focus that the thought contains.
3. Answer each absolute thought with an "or maybe" statement that introduces specificity and limits into pervasive/general thoughts, disrupts permanent thoughts with the possibility of change over time, or adds focus on circumstances to disrupt exclusive focus on personality flaws.
4. Start noticing whenever the negative "Top 40" starts playing in your mind and consciously choose to answer each of those recurring thoughts with the "Or maybe" statement you prepared to match each negative thought.
5. Keep practicing answering your negative thoughts with possibilities and be gentle with yourself when it doesn't feel effective at first. Changing thinking patterns takes time!
6. Enjoy the freedom that comes from introducing the possibility that things might not be as bad as you once were stuck thinking they'd be.

For more research on absolute thinking and depression, see Sweeney, P.D., Anderson, K., & Bailey, S. (1986). Attributional style in depression: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50, 974-991.

Thanks for reading!

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