



Do positive affirmations work?

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Let's start by defining what an affirmation is. According to Google, a positive affirmation is a "short phrase or statement, repeated aloud, in your head, or in writing, to challenge negative thoughts, build self-esteem, reduce stress, and encourage personal motivation. Often, they start with "I am.....". Sometimes positive affirmations are just abbreviated as affirmations, perhaps because no one wants to learn negative affirmations. Repeating negative affirmations to yourself will just make you more miserable and unsuccessful. You can use affirmations that other people have created or you can create your own. Lots of people recommend using affirmations and some people even ask for affirmations they can use.

Affirmations are essentially a tool we can use to help us change our automatic ways of thinking. All of us have thoughts and beliefs (a belief is a thought which we are convinced is true, but may in fact just be an opinion), and these are formed by our circumstances from the time of our birth and onwards. As new experiences are encountered, we can change and adapt existing thoughts and beliefs, and even develop new ones. Sometimes our thoughts and beliefs are not helpful to us, and – this is important – they are not the facts we may think they are. If you were told you were clumsy your thought or belief may be that you are a clumsy person. Your (negative) affirmation is "I am clumsy". This will impact the way you think about yourself, the way you feel about yourself, and what you choose to do. If you believe you are clumsy you are more likely to act in a clumsy manner, because we tend to act according to our thoughts and beliefs.

Now you may have been told you were clumsy by someone who was just having a bad day. A person who needed to take out their frustration on someone, and you were the closest someone. Perhaps, not only are you not clumsy, but you are very coordinated, and agile. But no one told you this. They only said you were clumsy and you believed it. Some of our thoughts and beliefs can, not only be false, but they work to our detriment. They prevent us from living the life we want to live. Now in certain types of therapy these negative and harmful beliefs are worked with and changed to more realistic and positive ones. Most people are not having therapy though. So along came positive affirmations to help motivate us, help us achieve mental and emotional states we want, and outcomes we desire.

So, positive affirmations can be good, in that they can counter negative thoughts we have that are not true and hold us back without necessarily having to go through the process of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

Do they work? Our understanding of neuroscience and cognitive processes, combined with the principle of neuroplasticity show they can. Beliefs are wired into the neural pathways in the brain.

The more we repeat them in any form (self-talk, writing, speaking out loud etc.) the stronger the neural pathway and the more entrenched and automatic the belief becomes. Initially it takes energy in the brain to process something new in the prefrontal cortex which is what happens when you think a new thought. With repetition the basal ganglia, a deeper and more primitive part of the brain (involved in habits and automatic behaviours) gets involved. Repeated thoughts eventually become your default programming and you don't even have to be deliberate in thinking them.

So do positive affirmations work:

1. By programming positive thoughts into our brain, positive feelings and constructive behaviours are much more likely. For most of us, our feelings and our actions will align with our thinking. Thus, life will get better.
2. They tend to be very helpful if you need to change your self-concept or self-image.
3. They must be repeated. That is how they become automated and thus the natural way in which you will think.
4. They must be realistic. Realistic depends on the type of person you are. If, when you repeat an affirmation, it doesn't sound at all like something that could be true for you then rework it until it is something you can get your head around. If, when you repeat your affirmation, your brain starts telling you that is absolute rubbish, then change the affirmation. The little research done on affirmations shows that if you don't believe it, then it doesn't work for you. Reword the affirmation. If for example, "I am successful" is not something you can believe, you can perhaps try something like, "Each day I become better at what I do".
5. They work best if you have a good sense of self and are reasonably close to something you can believe in (also from research). If the affirmation you say is so far away from what you do believe, the affirmation can make things worse. It can make you more negative and in fact reinforce negative beliefs. You probably have experienced this. You scroll through social media, and a post comes up that says things are looking up for you. You then tell yourself that is rubbish, such things never happen to you.
6. They should be fairly short sentences. A long sentence, or even sentences, don't work well. Affirmations work with repetition and repeating a short and to the point sentence is easier than trying to repeat something that is long and cumbersome many times a day.
7. You have to repeat your affirmations often. New thoughts get wired into your brain through repetition. Lots of repetition. So read it often. Read it aloud. Write it down many times a day. Think about what your life will be like when this is true. And you need to do this for many days and weeks. Some you want to probably repeat for life. Think of it as mental gym.
8. The brain learns new thoughts faster when your nervous system is more relaxed. Under hypnosis is a good way to learn new affirmations. Also just before falling asleep at night and on immediately awakening in the morning are good times - when you are somewhere between sleep and being fully wide awake. Many people use bedtime and early morning for reading and repeating their affirmations.
9. Don't use too many. If you try to repeat thirty affirmations a day that is too much. Keep it to five to eight or even less.

An affirmation is not a slogan or a tag line. It is not something that would make a good lyric either. It needs to be linked to what you value. What you want in your life. You are not marketing anything with an affirmation. You are changing the way you think. So, when you have some affirmations check this. Do I really want to think this way? What will I be doing when I think this way, given that thoughts affect actions? Can I imagine myself as a person who thinks like this? Is this thought one I would like to have going forward? Is this thought going to help me build a life I want.