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BLOGPOST: Monthly motivation: Finding happiness in misfortune



In our ['Monthly Motivation'](#) blog, philosopher Jörg Bernardy highlights topics that inspire us to pause and reflect for a moment. The November issue explores the ability to control emotions even in difficult times and to actively filter negative memories.

Finding happiness in misfortune

Recently, I got into conversation with an 82-year-old by chance during a walk. In the middle of a nature reserve on the border between Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein, he told me about his life. As a small boy, he'd first lost his father in the war and then his ailing mother soon thereafter. His older sister had died while fleeing from the Russian soldiers, and he'd ended up in a Danish children's home himself, from which he had been able to return to Germany some years later.

Think positively and filter your memories

Deeply touched by this man's misfortune and suffering, suddenly Corona seemed far away to me, almost irrelevant compared to what he had gone through. Afterwards, I couldn't think of anything better to ask than how it was possible that he still made such a content and cheerful impression. What was his secret for a happy and fulfilled life? Because, it must be said that he looked more fit and fresh at his 82 years than many a 28-year-old. Well, he answered, regardless of his experiences, he had always remained optimistic and focused on the positive side of things.

Could it really be that simple? However it may be, the inhabitants of Schleswig-Holstein are considered the happiest people in Germany. And indeed, this man was practically ecstatic about the years he'd spent in the children's home. He claimed his time there had not only been pleasant, but that he'd had the best years of his childhood in the company of the other children. It reminded me of the following words of Seneca: Calm is the person 'who is satisfied with himself and regards his own condition with pleasure, and does not allow anything to interrupt this joy'.

How to practice the art of blocking out

The Stoics already knew it: although we can't control what befalls us, we can control what we think about it and how we remember it. We should 'not increase our losses, but find something positive in adversity', Seneca says elsewhere. Could that be how the 82-year-old goes about life? Yes, there are dark days, weeks and months ahead of us, but instead of the usual Christmas madness, we could also use this period to open ourselves up to the little surprises in life.

The aim is to find balance, not to suppression our emotions, the American psychologist Daniel Goleman states in his classic Emotional Intelligence. With this he gets at the very core of stoic serenity. Put in simple terms: we have to be tough on the negative - and attentive and receptive to the positive in life. Allow yourself to block out the negative in and around you. 'And always focus only on the good, leave out the bad,' as the Austrian writer Eva Menasse recommends.

Find balance by being kind to yourself

In dark times, remember the 82-year-old and his secret for a fulfilled life. Emotional balance does not only mean that we prefer to

focus on others rather than just on ourselves. It can only be found by using the power of blocking out. Optimism may not be everything, but this winter especially it could become an important survival strategy.

Also practice so-called 'random acts of kindness'. Speak to strangers and be friendly to them. Take a moment to immerse yourself in the lives of others. Find out what's on their minds and why. Take a break from thinking about yourself. But above all: look at yourself benevolently. Be good and kind to yourself. Self-compassion is one of the most important survival skills for the coming months.

'How satisfying it is to block out and repress frightening or uncomfortable ideas and immediately find peace of mind.' (Marcus Aurelius)

Kind regards,

Jörg Bernardy

This interview was originally posted in our blog:

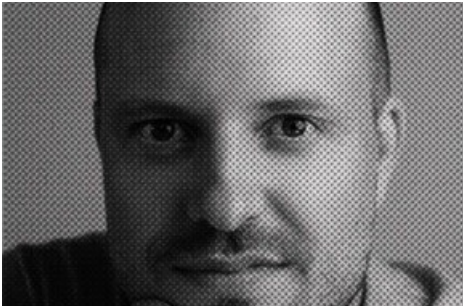
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Dr. Jörg Bernardy, author, philosopher and lecturer. Picture by Max Baier

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