

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 17: The Power of Negative Visualization

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Tim Ferriss: Welcome to another edition of the Tim Ferriss Show. This is Tim Ferriss speaking. I am at JFK and I am partially whispering, so I do not get punched in the face by everyone sitting around me. I am on route to Italy. I am super stoked. I have not been there in ages. [Speaking Italian] of my Italian, but that is okay. I will improvise.

This is a short audio essay. What I have been calling the in between-isode. I am borrowing that term. In this case, it is from a presentation that I gave, which many of you have not heard from Google I/O. That was the event and I am calling it the power of negative visualization. So, we always hear about positive visualization, positive thinking. I think it happens to be overrated and certainly from a pragmatic standpoint, there are times when you have to practice pessimism. Very strategic, tactical, pessimism to get what you want and avoid what you do not want.

As always, you can find all of these episodes on iTunes or at fourhourworkweek.com/podcast and if you enjoy these episodes, both the short ones and the longer one to two hour episodes, please support it by going to fourhourworkweek.com/podcast – actually, I misspoke, but I have to catch my flight so I will do it again. fourhourworkweek.com/books, alright? fourhourworkweek.com/books and that is where you will find the Tim Ferriss Book Club, books that have impacted my life greatly, which I link to then on Amazon, on Audible. Typically, one per month. There are four or five up right now. Check them out and without further ado, I hope you enjoy this very, very short episode. Thanks for listening.

Alright, so this is a photograph of Las Lenas in Argentina, where I went skiing with two close friends. One of whom recently died of pancreatic cancer. He was in his early 30's.

The same day I received an email notifying me that the 10-year-old daughter of a close friend had been diagnosed with inoperable cancer and this was very recent. And this catalyzed – produced a profound sense of urgency in me to do bigger and better things in my life and to test new directions before some undefined point in the future.

So, I want to talk about the most effective pair of productivity techniques that I have come across since 2004 that have helped me up until this point test the uncommon despite the fear of ridicule, criticism, failure, and so forth. And both techniques – I cheated a bit with the format. Some things we will repeat – are borrowed from stoicism, which was a school of philosophy from the Hellenistic period used by a lot of the Greco roman educated elite, including emperors, and military, and statesmen.

The first is called negative visualization and it is all related to the basic assumption that defining your fears, instead of your goals, is a key to doing anything uncommon, anything big. Negative visualization is what I would call preparation in practical pessimism. And that is, defining in excruciating detail the worst case scenarios.

So, as an anecdote, in 2004 I was working 14 hours a day in my own company, trapped in a beast of my own design, and know that I had to take a two to four week retreat to either streamline the business and extricate myself or shut it down because there were issues with exit options. I did not do that for six months because I was running an endless loop of what if scenarios. What if I missed a notification from the IRS? What if we lost the biggest customer we have and therefore had problems A, B, and C? Problem is, those fears were not actionable, just like poorly defined goals are not actionable.

Then, I came across the writing of Seneca – Lucius Seneca, who was an advisor the emperor in his day in Rome. Also, what you might consider the most successful investment banking and playwright at the time in Rome. And I performed an exercise that he suggested, which was taking out a piece of paper – in my case, an 8.5 by 11 sheet one evening, and detailing in the first column all the terrible things, the worst case scenarios, that can happen if I did what I was considering, which was this retreat. For you, it might be a change of job. It might be proposing a new project. It might be ending a relationship. It could be any number of things. All of the negative things that could happen. Second column, all the things that I could do to minimize the likelihood of those things happening. And then, the last column was all the line by line actions I could take to get back to where I was then. To re-achieve the status quo so to speak. Maybe getting back into the industry that you would leave to start your own startup, whatever that might be.

And in that instant, I saw that on a scale from zero to ten, ten being the most impactful, I was looking at an unlikely transient pain of about two and a potential life changing permanent change of ten. And I took the trip. I took the trip that is why the book happened. That is why the world championships in tango happened. Everything that brought me to stand here today, I can trace back to that one evening and that one exercise.

So, let us move to practice. The second piece. The second technique is rehearsing the worst case scenarios. Seneca would put it thus, set aside a number of days each month where you are satisfied with the cheapest and scantiest of fare, meaning food, the roughest of dress, all the while asking yourself, is the condition I feared? What you are doing is exposing yourself to negative emotions, like fear, embarrassment, lack of finances, so that you are inoculated when you later have to make hard decisions, ask for hard things, or reject, refuse things.

So, you can act despite these emotions. Cato, who was viewed by Seneca as the perfect stoic, wore darker clothing than his expected light purple. Did not go with the tunic. He was very out of style in his day and he did so that he would learn to be ashamed of only the things that were truly shameful and to ignore the millions of things that men would otherwise have low opinions of.

So, it is very important that you practice your worst case scenario. What you will find is that many of the fears you have are based on under valuing the things that are easily attainable. So, those are two techniques that have resulted in the greatest gains, all of the uncommon, all of the big things that I have been able to do and I would encourage you, before trying to define your goals, to focus on defining your fears. Thank you very much.