

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Getting Beyond "Natural" Limitations

by Dr. Mike Armour

Let's play a "fill in the blank" game. Complete this sentence: "I am naturally . . ."

What pops into your mind immediately? Jot down everything that comes to mind.

Now that you've got these initial answers, think about the question a bit longer and add anything else that rises to the surface.

Next, look over your list carefully. Whether you filled in the blank with one or a dozen traits, everything on your list is more than mere self-perception. It is a key element of your identity. After all, this is a description of what you say you are naturally. What you are by nature.

Strange Things People Say

I'm always fascinated by the way people complete this statement. "I'm just naturally unlucky," they say. Or "I'm just naturally suspicious." And then there's the perennial, "I've just got a short fuse by nature."

One of my favorites is, "I'm just naturally depressive." I used to hear that often when I was working in counseling. Whenever someone gave me that line, I had a ready response. With a strong note of incredulity in my voice, I would say, "Naturally? You're depressive naturally?"

Then I would jump from my chair and say, "I want you to come with me for a second." With my "naturally depressed" cohort in tow, I would head down the hallway to a daycare center elsewhere in the building. I would stop at a place where we could watch the children at play.

"Do me a favor," I would ask. "Look at all of these kids and help me identify the ones that are naturally depressive."

The other person inevitably looked at me oddly, then chuckled. Here were a dozen youngsters at play, all laughing, running, climbing, frolicking. Having a great time. So I would press the issue a bit harder. "Tell me, which ones are naturally depressive."

Needless to say, this little venture never went much further. My point was already made. None of those children were "naturally depressed," because no one is born depressed.

Convenient Excuses

What we are by nature is that buoyant, laughing, carefree child at play. We have to learn all the fears, insecurities, self-doubts, and anxieties that rob us of our natural joy and buoyance. Unfortunately, we learn negative life patterns so well that we convince ourselves that "I was just born this way."

Moreover, the rationale that "I'm this way by nature" easily becomes an excuse for not making change. After all, if I'm "this way" naturally, there's not much I can do about it. People will simply have to accommodate my sullenness, because, after all, "I'm moody by nature." They will have to tolerate my biting sarcasm because "I'm cynical by nature." Or they will have to endure my ceaseless fretting, because "I'm a worrier by nature."

A more accurate way of describing ourselves would be, "I've learned to respond to disappointment by getting moody, and now I'm so accomplished at it that moodiness has become a habit." Or, "I've learned to worry about so many things that I easily fret about everything."

There were never any "natural cynics" or "natural fretters" among those children in the daycare center, no more than there were "natural depressives." But 20 years downstream many of those kids will have lost their joy and exuberance. They will have started building their identity around a learned, non-productive response to life.

Unlearning the Past

The good news is, what we've learned we can unlearn. If it took us 20 years to learn it, we're not likely to "unlearn" it overnight. But we can get started. Habits can be broken. People break them every day.

So go back to the way you answered the opening question. Did you describe your "natural self" with terms or phrases that could apply to a grown-up, responsible version of those kids in the daycare center? Or were your statements more along the lines of my counselees who would say, "I'm naturally depressive"?

If the latter, would you like to change? Then, here's a way to begin. First, drop the "identity language." That is, quit saying, "I'm a worrier" or "I'm a loner." Identity language has powerful programming influence on the unconscious mind. When we tell the unconscious mind repeatedly, "I am this way," the unconscious mind begins to act as if those qualities are cast in concrete and cannot be changed.

Instead, start saying, "I've learned to worry a lot." Or, "I've learned to deal with life by isolating myself from others." Now your language suggests a behavior that has become your customary response. And behavior always sounds more like a choice than a life-response cast in concrete.

Second, quit excusing yourself by saying, "That's just who I am." Hold yourself accountable for your behavior. For becoming sullen. For blowing your top. For being sarcastic. For isolating yourself from others.

I'm not talking about blaming yourself or kicking yourself when you slip into the old habits. Rather, simply hold yourself accountable. Constantly remind yourself that your

behavior is a learned response and that you are free to learn alternative ways of coping with life.

Then define what those alternatives are and start pursuing them at every opportunity. If your initial efforts fall short of your hopes, keep trying. Repeatedly say to yourself, " I'm still in the process of learning a new behavior." By picturing yourself as immersed in a learning process, there's room for trial and error. You brush aside the temptation of seeing your effort as failure.

Persist as a learner. Little by little, old habits will yield to new habits. And the new habits will become second nature. And before long the new second nature will feel like a new identity.

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