

How to 'do' a good day

By Rod Matthews

Part 1 – The wisdom to know the difference

How do you 'do' a good day?

It sounds like a ridiculous question at first. You might be thinking that a good day is something that just happens, something that is dependent on many variables coming together and subject to things outside of your control. In some respects you would be right.

There are some things that happen in our life that we have no control over, and yet their effect on our life (let alone on one day of that life) is phenomenal. The loss of someone close to us, ill health, getting married, winning a large sum of money: our degree of control over some of these things is very limited.

What we can do in this series of articles, however, is look at:

- How we respond when these things happen,
- What we can do to reduce the recurrence of triggers for a bad day,
- What we can do to increase the number of triggers for a great day,
- How we can change our thoughts, feelings and behaviours to get better results for ourselves and for those around us.

Let's put these things to one side for a moment, we shall revisit them later. We will start off by examining the more mundane, day-to-day frustrations and difficulties that are a part of life and ask the question... how do we do a *bad* day?

Where does it all start?

Most people would agree that a bad day starts with some event, often external to our control. This could be called a *trigger*.

Imagine that you are lying snug in your bed and slowly you become aware that it is a little lighter than it usually is before you get up. Then the realisation dawns on you that the alarm has not gone off and that you are going to be late for work.

You jump out of bed and run around like a headless chook. You don't have time for breakfast or a shower. You hop into the car and drive off, only to get stuck in horrendous traffic. You're going to be late for a very important meeting with your manager and an important client. There is going to be some explaining to do...

In the space provided below, note down what you would be thinking and how you would be feeling at this point in time:

Chances are that most people would be thinking things along the lines of 'Today's going to be a bad day!' or 'I should have stayed in bed!', and feeling stressed and tense.

Triggers ⇒ Attitudes

So *triggers* (such as *no alarm, no breakfast, traffic jam* and *late for meeting*) will lead to thoughts and feelings or, for the sake of this article, *attitudes* (such as 'Today's going to be a bad day', or 'I should have stayed in bed', or 'I'm feeling stressed and tense').

The next step is to identify how you behave when these attitudes arise.

In the space provided below, note down how you would be walking the last couple of meters to work; how you might respond to people saying 'good morning', or what you might do when you arrive at your work area if you were thinking 'Today's going to be a bad day!', or 'I should have stayed in bed!' and feeling stressed and tense:

Once again, chances are that most people would be walking in a 'today's a bad day!' way. For example:

- Head down,
- Frowning,
- Perhaps walking faster than normal in an angry fashion,
- Perhaps walking slower than normal in a defeated type fashion.

When other people say 'Good morning' you might respond:

- With fewer words. For example, 'Hello' rather than 'Hello. How are you today?'
- In a less melodic tone of voice than normal,
- With less eye contact than normal,
- You might even be a little cynical or rude with your response: 'What's so good about this morning?'

Triggers ⇒ Attitudes ⇒ Behaviours

So... you arrive at the office and since the meeting is over, and you can't see your manager to explain why you are late, you go directly to your desk. Your email is overflowing and the messages all seem to be marked urgent. You check your voice messages and there are three urgent calls and a short message from your boss asking where you are.

As you start to deal with the emails a workmate walks in and says, 'We've got a problem. I need you to look at this straight away.'

Once again the behaviours you choose to use at this stage could range from rudeness through to passive aggression:

- Keeping your fingers on the computer keyboard while they talk,
- Giving them minimal eye contact while still typing away,
- Answering them with sentences of seven words or less: 'Yep. I don't mind. Whatever. If you think so. That's fine.'
- Giving them a forced smile,
- Sighing and rolling your eyes as they explain what is going on.

All of these behaviours will make it very clear to the other person that you are not interested in what they are talking about. Only the most evolved of workmates is going to say something like, 'You seem a little distracted. Is everything OK?'. These workmates only exist in badly-scripted training videos. In real life they are certainly on the endangered species list.

The fact of the matter is that most workmates will just shake their heads as they walk out, roll their eyes at other team members (indicating that you are in a bad mood again) and then talk about you in an unflattering way around the coffee machine and water cooler.

The net result is that people will approach you in a way that suggests you *are* having a bad day and you *are* in a bad mood.

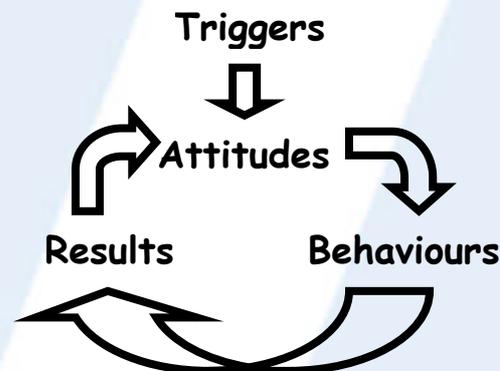
They might:

- Force a smile when dealing with you,
- Speak to you in sentences of seven words or less. 'Yep. I don't mind. Whatever. If you think so. That's fine.'
- Precede what they want to tell you with phrases like 'Look, you're not going to like this, but ...', 'I know you're having a bad day today, but ...', 'Now don't get cranky at me, but ...'

Triggers ⇒ Attitudes ⇒ Behaviours ⇒ Results

All of these behaviours only serve to reinforce your current attitude, that 'Today's going to be a bad day.' As a result of our attitudes and behaviours, the quality of the day becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In summary:



This is made up of the following:

Triggers:

- Alarm doesn't go off,
- Caught in traffic,
- Late for a meeting.

Attitudes:

- 'Today's going to be a bad day!'
- 'I should have stayed in bed!'
- Feeling stressed and tense.

Behaviours:

- Walking with head down and frowning,
- Perhaps walking faster than normal in an angry fashion,
- Perhaps walking slower than normal in a defeated fashion,
- When talking to workmates: responding with fewer words, in a less melodic way than normal, and perhaps with less eye contact than normal.

Results:

- People force a smile when dealing with you,
- People speak to you in sentences of seven words or less. 'Yep. I don't mind. Whatever. If you think so. That's fine.'
- People precede what they want to tell you with phrases like 'Look, you're not going to like this, but ...', 'I know you're having a bad day today, but ...', 'Now don't get cranky at me, but ...'
- Increased error rates and re-working, due to the fact that people are avoiding you and finding reasons to not talk to you.

How do you do a *good* day?

The reverse of the above scenario therefore applies for being able to 'do a good day'.

Once again, let's leave the triggers aside for a moment.

Imagine for a moment that you are thinking to yourself that today is going to be a good day. You are feeling on top of things and ready for anything.

In the space provided below, note down how you would be walking the last couple of meters to work, how you might respond to people saying good morning, what you might do when you arrive at your work area, if you are thinking 'Today's going to be a great day!,' and feeling enthused and ready:

Once again, chances are that most people would be walking in a 'Today's a great day!' way. For example:

- Head up,
- Smiling,
- Perhaps walking faster than normal in an purposeful fashion,
- Perhaps walking slower than normal in a relaxed and comfortable manner.

When other people say 'Good morning' you might respond:

- With more words. For example, 'Hello Daniel. How are you today?' Rather than just 'Hello',
- In a more melodic tone of voice,
- With confident and comfortable eye contact.

When you arrive in the office, and as you start to deal with the emails a workmate walks in and says, 'We've got a problem. I need you to look at this straight away.'

If you were thinking 'Today's going to be a great day', and feeling enthused and ready, you are more likely to respond like the following:

- Turn to give them your full attention,
- Smile as you ask them what it is we need to look at,
- Involve them in a conversation that works to solve the issue together.

These behaviours will generate a very different result. For example:

- The workmate smiles and thanks you as they walk out,
- The workmate talks about how you are great to work with when talking to other people at the coffee machine or water cooler,
- Less errors and re-working as people are happy to keep you in-the-loop,
- You will be thinking 'Today is going to be a good day. I have already headed off a possible crisis.'

When bad things happen

Now, I can understand that the more cynical among you might be thinking, at this stage, something like:

Ah yes! The power of positive thinking. Very good Rod, but sadly impractical. Bad things *do* happen. Or are you saying that if someone runs up the back of my car that I should leap about with joy?

Bad things do happen, and no matter what we say or do after the fact, this is not going to change the reality that bad things have happened. I'm not suggesting that when bad things happen you should respond inappropriately - what I'm saying is that how we respond when bad things happen will make all the difference.

To illustrate this a little further, allow me to introduce you to my two sons Liam and Riley. The boys are about two years apart in age, with the combined energy of 14 adults and the curiosity of a roomful of cheeky monkeys.

A number of years ago, Liam was watching the TV in the lounge room, while Riley was fossicking around in the kitchen. All of a sudden there was an enormous crash in the kitchen. When I walked in, Riley was standing on a chair and surrounded on the floor by broken glass and lollies. The lolly jar that we had in the pantry was smashed on the ground and Riley had been caught red-handed.

'What happened Riley?' I asked.

Riley's first response was probably as a result of still being in a little shock. He tried to *deny* that there was a problem:

'What do you mean, 'what happened'?'

Pointing to the mess on the floor, I asked,

'The noise, the broken lolly jar... what happened Riley?'

Now unable to deny any longer, Riley tried to *blame*:

'It was Liam.'

'Liam was in the lounge with me when the crash happened, Riley. Answer *that* and stay fashionable.'

Running out of options, Riley quickly and cleverly tried *justification*:

'I was just trying to get a black jellybean for you Dad.'

'Nice try Riley. You know that you have to ask us before you go to the lolly jar.'

At this point Riley realises that the only option left is to *quit*. So he runs into his bedroom and hides until he assumes it is safe to come out. He knows it is safe because the door to his bedroom opens just enough for

him to survey the area. Then he sends out his toy car across the floor working on the theory that if the car makes it, it could be OK to come out.

Let's summarise these responses to a bad situation:

- Denying
- Blaming
- Justifying
- Quitting

We call these *victim behaviours*, as this is what 'victims' do. They say things like 'I am a victim of circumstance,' or 'Bad things always happen to me,' or 'I'm not responsible.'

Children aren't the only people who exhibit victim behaviours. Perhaps you know some people (perhaps even you yourself) have been known to react in such a way:

Denying: 'Problem? What problem? Everything is fine!'

Blaming: 'Well if management would just wake up,' or 'If the clients would just understand...'

Justifying: 'I know that I should be doing it that way, but I'm going to continue doing it this way because...'

Then there are those who have quit, but haven't had the decency to resign. They still rock up each day, doing the bare minimum. They don't care and they don't contribute, yet they have the audacity to collect a paycheque. How rude!

It is important to note that victim behaviours are human. We all use them from time to time. When we lose our wallet, right through to when we lose a loved one. Perhaps these responses are there to protect us from being overwhelmed by the volume and scale of some misfortunes.

When you lose your wallet, the first reaction is often to deny that it is lost. We look in the suit pocket again and again, we check the car for the fifth time. We don't want to accept that it is gone.

I can remember being at a friend's funeral. The widowed husband was behaving in a relatively normal manner, organising people and catering and giving a speech without choking or breaking into tears once. It would be easy to observe his behaviour and assume that either he didn't really love her, or that he was unusually strong. Neither was the case... he was denying the reality of what had happened until he had the time to deal with it.

Blaming, justifying and quitting can also be steps in the path to acceptance. These are human responses and we are experiencing our full humanity when we have these feelings and are able to recognise them.

By themselves, however, these reactions will not resolve the issue. They will not move us on, they will not strengthen us and they will not allow us to learn.

There is an alternative to victim behaviour.

Response-ability

Writing 'responsibility' as two words tells us of its origin and meaning. Responsibility is about our *ability* to *respond*. This highlights two key components of responsible behaviour:

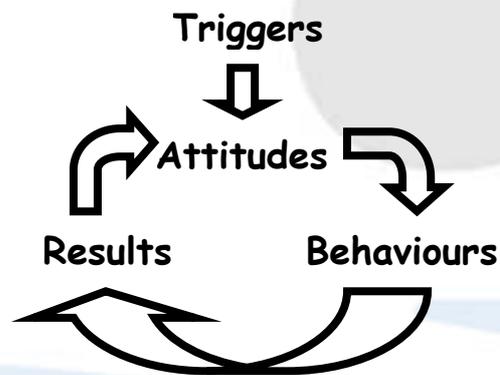
1. *Response* implies that you have a degree of control (as opposed to reaction).
2. *Ability* implies an action, skill or behaviour. This is not what you know, or what you believe, but what you *do*.

Sure, stuff happens (you may know that saying with a different 's' word). That being said, it is not what happens that really matters; it is how you are able to respond when it happens that matters.

At this point I'm reminded of the famous quote from St. Frances of Assisi:

Grant me the courage to change that which I can, the serenity to live with that I cannot, and the wisdom to know the difference.

When we revisit the following diagram:



It becomes evident that some of this is 'that which I can' and some is 'that which I cannot.' St Frances of Assisi may well have been saying:

*Grant me the courage to change my **attitudes** and **behaviours**, the serenity to live with the **triggers**, and an article downloaded from the internet to help me know the difference!!!*

Mapping your good and bad days...

In the space below, take a moment to identify your triggers, attitudes, behaviours and results.

As you do this, notice what happens in your head and in your heart when you are asked to analyse these moments in time in this way.

| How I do a bad day | How I do a great day |
|--|---|
| <p>Triggers:</p> <p>In this space, identify what you might see or hear that would lead you to start thinking 'Today is going to be a bad day.' Try to be as specific as possible.</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You have over 50 e-mails unanswered. • A certain person walks toward you. • You can see a certain person is calling you on the phone. • Your 'to do' list is long and nothing is started. | <p>Triggers:</p> <p>In this space, identify what you might see or hear that would lead you to start thinking 'Today is going to be a great day.' Try to be as specific as possible.</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You hear your favourite song on the radio. • You arrive at work already knowing the first thing you will do and you get that done. • You arrive at work early and have time to start things without interruption. • You make someone laugh and smile. |
| <p>Attitudes:</p> <p>In this space, identify what you are thinking and feeling when the above triggers happen. Be as specific as possible - perhaps even quote yourself.</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Uh-oh, here we go again.' • 'I'm always responding to stupid e-mails. I never seem to be able to get anything substantial done.' • 'Here they come. I hope it's not me that stuffed up. They look like they are out for blood again.' | <p>Attitudes:</p> <p>In this space, identify what you are thinking and feeling when the above triggers happen. Be as specific as possible - perhaps even quote yourself.</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'I love that. That is so cool.' • 'Done! Great. What's next! Today's going well.' • 'Ah! Here comes Peta, I love talking to her.' |

Behaviours:

In this space, identify how you behave when you are thinking the above thoughts. Again, be as specific as possible.

For example:

- Rolling my eyes, sighing, slumping my shoulders, shaking my head and frowning.
- Hesitate on starting. Asking myself questions like 'Should I do this now or should I do that first?'
- Find reasons to not start now. Saying 'That's a really big project. I'll start that when I have more time.'

Behaviours:

In this space, identify how you behave when you are thinking the above thoughts. Again, be as specific as possible.

For example:

- Smiling, eye contact, eyes wide open, nodding and leaning forward.
- Finishing something or at least getting it as far as I can at this point before moving onto the next thing.
- Repeating a personal mantra like, 'Just do it!' 'There's no time like the present' or 'This is not a dress rehearsal.'

Results:

In this space identify what happens when you behave that way. Consider the results from a variety of different angles. Quantity of output, quality of output, speed of output, costs, other people's response, team values, the message you send to others about what you are like to work with.

Results:

In this space identify what happens when you behave that way. Consider the results from a variety of different angles. Quantity of output, quality of output, speed of output, costs, other people's response, team values, the message you send to others about what you are like to work with.

What's it like?

Now keep in mind that we are not suggesting that by writing out your triggers and attitudes that the trigger or the bad thing will stop happening. Remember that many triggers are things we can not change and therefore need to learn to live with.

What we are doing here is looking at:

- How we respond when things happen.
- What we can do to reduce the number and occurrence of perpetual triggers for a bad day.
- What we can do to increase the number and occurrence of triggers for a great day.
- How we can change our thoughts, feelings and behaviours to get better results for ourselves and for those around us.

With this in mind, in the space below, list what it was like for you to analyse these moments in time this way:

For me, this exercise highlights how unjustifiable some of my reactions have been and how they have only served to make the situation worse. It also highlights how I have not made the most of my time on this earth to this point. A humbling experience! Perhaps I should learn how to change my attitude...

That's all very well Rod, but...

I can understand that there might be some people who are thinking a number of different things to themselves. For example:

- *"Yes Rod, but not all happiness needs to be expressed. I can be happy without having to behave like an extrovert on speed."*

Or...

- *"Yes Rod. Fine. But perhaps life is about experiencing the highs and the lows. Perhaps life is about balance or contrast and being 'happy' all the time is not necessarily the ideal life."*

Or...

- *"That's all very well Rod but aren't there just some days? You know, some days when the brain doesn't seem to produce the right chemistry, the synapses don't line up, the central nervous system seems to have gone on strike? Some days the effort is all too much."*

Let's address these valid concerns, one at a time.

"Yes Rod, but not all happiness needs to be expressed. I can be happy without having to behave in an extrovert on speed."

I agree! Happiness that is expressed too much is called mania, and a maniac will very soon experience the opposite to happiness when people no longer want to be around them. On top of this, there are people who are exceptionally happy but do not necessarily have to express it externally.

There are a number of different paths to happiness. One path is through the sort of activities that we associate with the pleasant life. For example: watching a good movie, drinking a fine wine, having a bath or being with friends and loved ones. These activities usually require a low level of skill, they are pleasant and the reward is fleeting.

There are also activities that are associated with being fully engaged. Such as: playing a sport, playing a musical instrument, solving a complex problem, creating, writing and drawing. These activities require an equal match of skill and challenge, and we lose a sense of time and self as we become totally focused on the activity. You are the ball!!!

There are also activities that are associated with meaning and contribution. Packing hampers for less fortunate people on Christmas Eve,

helping out at the RSPCA, making sick children in hospital laugh, volunteering your time, volunteering your skills. You contribute to something greater than yourself and the intrinsic reward lasts a lifetime.

So it is correct to say that not all happiness is hedonistic or extroverted. Some of the most rewarding happiness involves passing through difficulty, focusing effort, expending great amounts of physical and emotional energy and even self sacrifice.

Whether the activities are pleasant, engaging or meaningful, all these activities require the courage to change what you can, the serenity to live with what you cannot change and the wisdom to know the difference.

If you are watching a movie and the phone rings, you have no control over the trigger (the phone ringing) but you have complete control over how you answer the phone. When playing a sport, the final whistle is blown and your team has lost. You have no control over the final result anymore, but you do have complete control over how you respond to the other team and the loss. You may have very little control over the health of a child in the long term but you make a phenomenal difference to the child in the here-and-now when you volunteer your time to make a sick child laugh.

"Yes Rod. Fine. But perhaps life is about experiencing the highs and the lows. Perhaps life is about balance or contrast and being 'happy' all the time is not necessarily the ideal life."

Once again I agree! I'm certainly not arguing that everyone should be happy (in a hedonistic sense) all of the time. Remember that happiness also involves passing through difficulty, focusing effort, expending great amounts of physical and emotional energy and even self sacrifice. Try asking a marathon runner at the 35km mark if they are happy.

It is true to say that the unexamined life is not worth living, but it is equally true to say that the un-lived life is not worth examining. Some of the people who would report feeling the most happy and satisfied with their life would be people who have gone through great hardship... and endured.

So yes, life is about contrasts, and perhaps the most happy people are those that have been able to best cope with these contrasts by... having the courage to change what they can, the serenity to live with what they can't and the wisdom to know the difference.

"That's all very well Rod but aren't there just some days? You know, some days when the brain doesn't seem to produce the right chemistry, the synapses don't line up, the central nervous system seems to have gone on strike? Some days the effort is all too much."

I could not agree more. Some days are certainly harder than others and some days seem to be so hard that trying isn't worth it for whatever reason.

I would ask you, however, that just before you decide to not try, ask yourself this question: *"What are the implications of not trying for today?"* If you are happy to accept the answer to that question then I would strongly encourage you to take the phone off the hook, roll over and pull the doona over your head.

If you choose to do this then I would congratulate you for learning acceptance!

In Part 2...

So, to summarise *part 1* of this series of articles, we could say that knowing the difference between what you can and can't change will help you in all aspects of life. We cannot change triggers and we do not have direct control over the results of we generate. In most cases, what we can control is our attitudes and behaviours.

In *How to 'do' a good day, part 2 -The courage to change your attitude*, we look at what it is we can do to change the way we think about what has already happened. We look at how you can increase your resilience and your optimism, and how you can change your attitudes.



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