



Lesson Title:

Doing the Impossible

Course Level:

High School - Undergraduate

Courses: Psychology, Positive Psychology
Class Time: 30-60 minutes
Assignment Time: N/A
Prerequisite: Read Be the Hero
Overview: Students explore the concept of optimism as it relates to “impossible” and how it shapes ideas, emotions, and actions.

OBJECTIVES

1. Build personal strength: optimism.
2. Understand causal links between optimism/pessimism and creativity and performance.

ASSIGNMENT

No homework assignment.

CLASS ACTIVITIES

1. Overcome Impossible Scenario

Action: READ

US Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said, “Most of the things worth doing in this world had been declared impossible before they were done.” In some very real and tangible ways what we view as possible or impossible makes it so.

The following is a true story experienced by the author of the book Be the Hero. He was flying from NY to Kansas City. His flight was delayed 45 minutes in the terminal and another 30 minutes on the runway. The flight attendant was coming on to the

PA to announce further delays. You have all seen this situation. The passengers were angry, bitter, miserable. Now imagine that you are the flight attendant and that your company has asked you to turn these passengers not just happy but into raving fans of the airline. Further, imagine that you have a total of \$5 you can spend to make that happen – not \$5 per passenger, but \$5 total.

In groups of 4-8 give students 1 minute to come up with their most creative idea for achieving this mission impossible.

Action: DEBRIEF

Have students share their ideas.

Action: READ

In the author's case, here is what happened. The flight attendant came on the PA and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sorry to tell you that we are going to experience further delays. However, during these delays I like to play a game I call Find The Phrase. In the seatback in front of you there is a copy of the award winning Midwest Airlines magazine. I am going to tell you a phrase that appears somewhere in the magazine. The first person to find the phrase and ring their flight attendant call button will win a free adult beverage of your choice. The phrase is 'thriving online.'

The passengers loved it. They played 4 rounds of Find The Phrase before the delay was lifted. The drinks given away cost the airline about \$1 each. So for less than \$5 and without adding to anyone's workload, this flight attendant did what 99% of the airline industry assumes is impossible.

When the flight attendant was asked about his actions he told the author, "No one told me to do this, but miserable passengers make my job miserable. I just figured there had to be something I could do."

Discussion:

1. How does the assumption of possible vs. impossible affect your thoughts and actions?

Key Talking Points:

- Action is both the outcome and the generator of optimism. A belief that something is possible will lead to action. Actions then spur new ideas and open up new possibilities. Therefore, one way to get out of victim stories and mentality is to simply seek out some initial action, even if it is a small step.
- Fruitful action is even more important. In this exercise the 60-second time limit forced everyone into immediate action. The action generated optimistic expectations. If this were a longer project successes along the way would help to bolster energy and optimism for ongoing success. One risk of immediate action is that you find yourself in a cycle of defeat.
- The second story in Be the Hero about your situation develops gratitude. That plays an ongoing role of bolstering your energy to help you maintain

optimistic thoughts, emotions, and actions. Even if you lack “early successes” in some arena, your general stories of gratitude can bolster you to continue seeking new actions.

2. Local Impossible Scenarios

Action:

Brainstorm issues deemed impossible within the students’ lives.

For each issue, give groups of 4-8 students 1-3 minutes to identify their most creative solutions to their “impossible” challenges.

Discussion:

1. What stands out to you from that exercise?
2. How was it different working on this issue vs. the airline issue?

Key Talking Points:

- It is often easier to see alternative stories for someone else than for yourself. When we believe something is impossible we have a victim story about what we can do. Victim stories depress your mood. Depressed affect diminishes creativity.
- One simple benefit of therapy is providing more creative alternatives to the stories the patient is telling. The skilled therapist does this not by always offering new stories, but by helping the patient build the skill to craft their own new stories.

3. Review Be the Hero

Discussion:

- What are the seemingly impossible challenges confronted in Be the Hero?
- How might you have approached those situations?

Key Talking Points:

- Impossible challenges included confronting Yvette, caring happily for a colicky baby, remaining positive after being laid-off, responding calmly to a screaming customer, working under a brutal boss, facing a child’s illness.