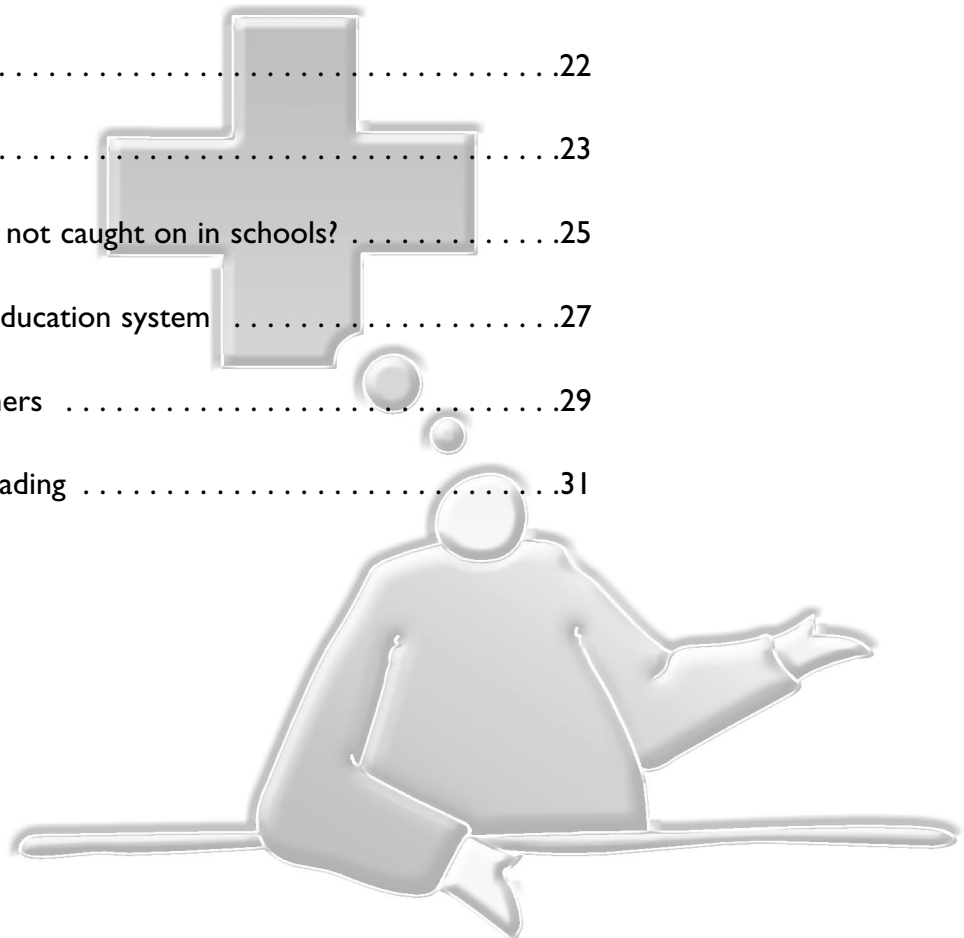




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# The psychology of achievement

'Positive thinking' is an umbrella term for a range of ideas, attitudes and techniques. It aims to help people be more aware of the power of their own thoughts and their own moods and how to control them in order to lead happier and more successful lives. Its roots are mainly in cognitive psychology and cognitive therapy, but it also draws on other branches of psychology and from physiology and physical medicine.

Cognitive approaches grew up in the United States in the seventies as a means of providing practical solutions for depression and many other psychological problems which, it was claimed, behaviourist and other value-based psychological systems could not. It was seen as a way of going beyond getting in touch with your feelings and feeling better about yourself with no actual change in behaviour.

It continues to be studied and developed and now has applications well beyond the solving of psychological problems. It's the basis of a set of personal development techniques known as 'Neuro-linguistic programming' which claim to provide step-by-step procedures to make excellence easily learnable. It has variously been described as 'the new science of personal achievement', 'the psychology of achievement' and 'the psychology of excellence'.

In the last three decades positive thinking in one form or another has become increasingly popular on both sides of the Atlantic especially in the corporate sector and in sport. It forms the basis for what a growing number of motivational 'gurus' such as Anthony Robbins in the United States and Jack Black in Britain have to offer.

The proponents of positive thinking emphasise its practicality. They say it provides you with practical support to change your beliefs and your attitudes and provides techniques which you can learn to help you do so.

The crucial role of self-belief in motivation and success is well documented in the many studies that have been made of successful people worldwide in many fields. At the top levels of sport the importance of mental as well as physical training is now well recognised.

In fact most of us use some aspects of positive thinking in our lives without being aware of it. But we don't use the techniques systematically or even consciously and we have never been taught to use them. For instance positive feelings, which allow teachers to deal with challenging events, can arise at the end of a week in anticipation of the weekend or of a holiday period. Often, in moments of adversity, memories of a treasured summer holiday may come to our rescue helping us to gain a necessary feeling of distance from the immediately threatening or challenging situation.

## The key ideas behind positive thinking

Positive thinking is very much about becoming aware of and changing the way we think. Indeed the basic premise is that we can change the way we feel and the way we act by changing the way we think.



The emphasis is on our inner **potential** to achieve success and be happy. The belief is that deep down we all know what is good for us. We are born with what is variously described as ‘an inner intelligence’, an ‘inner capacity for happiness’, wisdom, common sense or ‘healthy psychological functioning’.

This is something only we ourselves can access; it doesn’t come from external sources. We are born with it and as children we have a remarkable capacity to access it, but as we grow, instead of developing that capacity, many of us lose it, and as a result lose our self-belief and our self-confidence.

But despite what we think of ourselves we are all capable of much more. Almost everything people really want is some possible state and we are all capable of getting in touch with what that is, and we are all capable of moving towards it.

**Thinking** plays a significant role in helping or hindering us from accessing our inner potential. It’s such an obvious commonplace activity we never give it a second thought. But our thoughts are crucially important: they influence our feelings, guide our behaviour and even impact on our physical health. If we tell ourselves we are getting better, then we are more likely to – our body believes every word we say.

We tend to gravitate towards our dominant thoughts. Even if you are thinking about something you do not want, you will move towards it. If someone says to you ‘don’t think about elephants’ that is exactly what you will think about. This is because the mind works on pictures. When someone says to you ‘don’t think about elephants’ you get a picture of elephants in your mind. Your mind cannot and will not work on the reverse of an idea.

