

# The Dirt on Perspective-taking

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What is dirt?

To the ordinary person, dirt is icky. It's stains mean more laundry, and it's trails lead to extra mopping. To most, it's filthy, unwanted, and inconvenient.

But to the farmer, dirt is precious. The farmer spends hours each day surrounded by dirt. They eagerly pick up dirt and run it through their fingers. The farmer looks at dirt and sees opportunity. Potential. Growth. Life.

Farmers have a refreshing ability to look at something as common as dirt- something most of the world views as unfavorable- and by embracing a creative and hopeful perspective, they see something worthwhile.

While so many things are beyond our control in agriculture, our perspective is something we own. We get to choose how we're going to view an imperfect situation, and how we're going to respond to it. It's within our control to look at something as an obstacle, or to look at it as an opportunity.

For example, an equipment breakdown is undoubtedly frustrating. It interrupts your day, throws off your plans, and costs you money. But it can also allow you time to work on a different project, or head home early to spend time with your family (that chances are, you haven't felt able to prioritize in awhile). All of these outcomes are true, and it's fair to be frustrated about the negative aspects of the situation. Choosing optimism isn't the same as "just being positive." It's acknowledging those valid, negative outcomes, but then recognizing that there are ALSO positive outcomes. You get to choose what perspective to focus on most (and since realistic optimism leads to higher productivity, less depression, and generally better health, there are obvious benefits to choosing the latter).

Developing an optimistic perspective is a tool that takes effort and practice, especially when it's not something you've made a habit of in the past. Start by making a small goal to challenge a negative thought- right in a moment of chaos- once a week. Give one coworker or family member permission to help you identify when you could be looking at something in a new way. Take a moment each morning to reflect on the stressful parts of the previous day, and think about how you could have approached them differently. Whatever efforts you make to practice taking control of your perspective puts you one step closer to making optimism a habit.

But remember, making an effort to “be better” becomes more and more difficult if you neglect your mental health. Stress weighs us down, and we can grow irritable, cynical, impulsive, forgetful, or careless. At that point, decision-making can feel like an exhaustive burden, and changing your perspective turns into a much harder choice.

If we create a habit of finding the good in difficult situations, we build a personal defense against the blow of defeat.

And as the farmer sees good in the dirt, so too can they see hope in the struggle, if only they make the choice.

Resources:

Controlling attitudes/perspectives-

<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/publications/kids-family/farm-stress-fact-sheets-stress-management-for-farmers-ranchers>

How stress affects us-

<https://www.ilfb.org/resources/mental-health-wellness/how-stress-affects-you/>

Optimism-

<http://positivepsychology.org.uk/optimism-pessimism-theory/>