

721 words (final version)

## Positive Thinking:

### Ramblings of a Highgate Housewife

We are lovelier than ever! Well, according to an October 2011 report by the Young Foundation, we are. Apparently we now enjoy greater tolerance and politeness than ever before; British manners and civility are improving despite the challenges of 'higher density living'. If you asked the average man on the street, would he agree? I suspect not. Did this cheerful report make the news? Well, the only report I could find were eight rather cynical minutes of Radio 4 airtime. So why?

I think we can all agree the media doesn't really like good news. The local news turned the run up to the Olympics into a daily drama: would we finish the stadium on time, how would we all get to work. They've talked us into recessions and this time they talked London into a ghost town with many of the major tourist attractions theatres and restaurants experiencing dramatic dips in their critical period for revenues. Figures like -40%, -50% and -60% were being bandied about and the term 'Olympic Slump' was eagerly adopted by the newspapers. (Oh, how the British media loves a catch phrase.. 'Broken Britain'..'Binge Britain'..).

Another explanation might be the 'youth of today' mentality. This belief that every generation seems to hold that *their* 'golden' years were better, the world has simply got worse, that things just aren't like they used to be (well, obviously). I wanted to understand why this is. As an eternal optimist and a mother, I want to believe the world is becoming a *better* place for my children to grow up in!

Derdun! I found a theory! In 2005 Mather & Carstensen set out to identify any differences in how we may recall positive or negative memories according to our age. To do this, they showed a mix of positive, neutral and negative images to 32 young, middle aged and old adults. The result was that the younger adults recalled more of the *negative* images, the middle-aged adults recalled slightly more of the *positive* images, and the older adults recalled *twice as many of the positive* images than of the negative ones. So, if we are to subscribe to this theory, as we get older we have a propensity to remember mainly only the good stuff from our past.

We all know everything isn't *really* getting worse though, don't we? We have indoor loos and deodorant and avocados, but there have also been critically important improvements.

Aside from some of the more obvious, like the eradication of smallpox and the fact that you're much less likely to be killed by a drunk driver, there have been some other major improvements that many people might find surprising.

For example, the National Office of Statistics reports that overall, teenage pregnancy in the UK is *falling*; since 2009 the prisoner re-offending rate has *dropped* by 10%; extreme world poverty has *halved* since 1981; the prevalence of HIV has *declined* since 2000. Stephen Pinker argues that "violence has been in decline for long stretches of time, and today we are probably living in the most peaceful moment of our species' time on earth".

Surely there is a point where the moral obligation to meet the needs of the greater good supersedes the political agenda behind the headline. During a time of uncertainty for everyone, isn't it even more important that we all try to fight our memory bias and focus on the positive?

I don't know about you, but for me and my family London has been a magical place to be this summer, with a royal wedding, Jubilee parties and the Olympics. How brilliantly organised the Olympics were and what a wonderful showcase for London it has been.

And here I am writing this for Buzz because I live in Highgate, a place I feel very privileged to be. What I love most about Highgate, as a mother of two young children, is the abundance of all the stuff idyllic childhoods are made of. Like at this time of year when we can look forward to Parish roasts, trick or treating and spooky walks, shows like Rumpelstiltskin and carol singing in Pond Square. There are days when you feel you might just be in the corner of a Richard Curtis film. For me at least, I feel there is much to be cheerful about.