

Healthy Optimism

By Allan Weisbard, L.C.S.W. © 2008
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Developing Healthy Optimism

Have you ever wondered why some people feel down and defeated when faced with difficult situations while others feel challenged and hopeful when faced with the very same situations? People develop optimistic or pessimistic outlooks by how they perceive and respond to their own challenges and successes.

Optimism is the feeling that, despite frustrations and setbacks, in the end things will turn out for the best. Optimists focus on expecting the best, when faced with uncertainty they see setbacks as temporary and remember their successes better than their failures.

Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

1. When you think about the past, do you focus on success more than failures?
2. Do you usually attribute positive outcomes to yourself or to good luck?
3. Do you look for the unseen benefit in difficult situations?
4. Do you find it difficult or easy to count on good things happening in your life?

By considering your answers to these questions, you can make your own assessment of your level of healthy optimism.

Dr. Martin Seligman in his book *Learned Optimism* writes: pessimists tend to believe that bad events will last a long time (permanent), undermine everything that they do (pervasive), and are their fault (personal). Optimists when confronted with difficult situations perceive that defeat is a temporary setback (this will not last), confined to that one situation (specific) and not necessarily their fault (shared responsibility). Because of this different explanatory style, optimists are more resilient when facing adversity than pessimists are.

A healthy optimist understands that both optimism and pessimism are useful perspectives, having more of one does not mean you negate the other. On many occasions in life we need both, and finding a balance that works well for you is helpful. For example, mentally bracing for imagined worst-case scenarios can be useful in predicting challenges and problems and taking preventative actions. Planning for and expecting challenges can develop courage, resilience, and confidence while increasing persistence and creative problem solving in difficult circumstances.

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According to Dr. Seligman, the fundamental guidelines for understanding when to use optimism is to ask yourself, what is the cost of failure in a particular situation? If something is risky and the cost of failure high, then looking carefully, objectively and pessimistically at the risk involved will help you take action to minimize the risks. Consequently, optimism should not be utilized in design and safety engineering, cost estimating, etc. For example we want aircraft and automobile engineers to have a pessimistic outlook while engaged in their professional responsibilities.

However if the cost of failure is low, such as sales, overcoming shyness or engaging in new activities, then it can be advantageous to be optimistic. If you find yourself giving up before you even try, then increasing your level of optimistic thinking will be helpful.

While you cannot control the events in your life, you can influence your self-talk and your explanatory style as to why these events happen to you. Some of the ways that you can do this include:

Changing your mind can change your life: learn to believe in yourself and your abilities, an optimistic attitude allows for increased persistence and creative problem solving. Realize that healthy optimism includes knowing that pessimism has its place. Mentally bracing for imagined worst case scenarios can develop courage, resilience and confidence.

Challenge pessimistic thinking by learning to replace negative, self-limiting thinking with positive self talk. There are researched, evidenced-based protocols for accomplishing this, utilizing cognitive behavioral therapy.

Focus on what went right instead of what went wrong. Be at least as aware of your success as your difficulties. Keep a success journal; write down three good things that happen daily. Explore and acknowledge the causes and impacts of these events on your life. Identify one change for the better that you have made in the last six months, how has that impacted your life?

Acknowledge and thank those in your life who have done something special for you. Make a habit of doing something special for others as often as possible.

Reduce anxiety and excessive worry by minimizing your exposure to bad news and negativity, while increasing prayer, meditation, exercise and sleep. *See my other articles on this website, for more on this.*

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Know and practice self-care strategies that require minimal time, money or resources. Be patient with yourself, understand that change happens incrementally, and progress expands upon itself. Align with activities and people that make you feel hopeful, confident and optimistic.

Realize that the future is all in your mind; Healthy optimism includes imagining positive outcomes. Look back from your future, imagine you've accomplished your goal, stop and reflect on the specific steps that took you there.

Find time daily to: **Stop: clear your mind, open your heart.**

Look: assess your options with new perspective.

Listen: discover creative solutions, put insights into action.

This helps to align our heart and brain to discover and create new solutions to old problems.

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