



# Optimism: A Key Ingredient to Happiness

BY KAREN J. REIVICH

## WHAT IS OPTIMISM?

Optimism is the belief that things will turn out well. It is the expectation that good things will come your way and that you have the ability to control the direction of your life. There are plenty of common phrases that capture the essence of optimism: "seeing the glass as half full," "making lemonade out of lemons," "every cloud has a silver lining." Each of these phrases captures the belief that optimism can transform a negative situation into something positive, and that optimism helps guide people to look for meaning in times of hardship.

Although optimism and pessimism often refer to how people think about the future, they also refer to how people think about the past; specifically, the causes of the good and bad events in their lives. When something bad happens—like having a fight with someone you love, or losing your job, or getting a bad grade on a test—optimistic thinkers believe that what caused the problem can be changed, and they believe that problems in one area of their lives won't necessarily lead to problems in all areas. Pessimistic thinkers, in contrast, believe that they are the sole cause of their problems, that those problems are going to last forever, and that they are going to seep into every aspect of their lives.

For example, imagine a fight between close friends. Optimistic thinkers might say to themselves, "I wasn't listening well and she was in a bad mood. Maybe I ought to call her and see if she wants to go for a walk." A pessimistic thinker might think, "I'm so self centered and I'm not a good friend to people. Well, that friendship is over!" An optimistic way of thinking sets the groundwork for reaching a resolution and ultimately moving forward in the relationship. The pessimistic way of thinking makes people want to retreat from that relationship and probably most others too.

## OPTIMISM IS A THINKING STYLE

One of the most important points about optimism is that optimism is a style of thinking, not a permanent part of your character. People can learn to change their style of thinking just like they can change the style of clothing they wear. This point is critical. People can learn to think optimistically. Children can learn to think optimistically. Pessimistic thinking can be replaced with optimistic thinking. And the reason this matters is that optimism is a significant determinant of mental health, academic and work success, physical health, and overall happiness.

Psychologists have long been interested in optimism and have a good understanding of what it is and why it matters. There have been hundreds of studies of optimism and what the findings show is that people who think optimistically report fewer symptoms of depression, do better in school and

in sports, are more productive at work, and are physically healthier than people who think pessimistically.

## OPTIMISM AND RESILIENCE: OPTIMISM LEADS TO PERSISTENCE

How does optimistic thinking lead to all of these good outcomes? It is known that optimism is a necessary ingredient of resilience. Research shows that part of what enables people to thrive despite setback, failure, and hardship is the ability to think optimistically in the face of adversity. Optimistic thinking motivates people—adults and children—to continue to persist and work to find solutions, even when situations look bleak. Optimism shines light where it is dark. Optimistic thinkers ask themselves, "Where do I have control? What can I do to make this situation better? What can I learn from this struggle?" Because optimistic thinkers focus on control, they don't slip into helplessness. And because they persist, they tend to succeed.

For example, one way in which optimistic thinking leads to better physical health is quite simply that people who think optimistically believe that they can take charge of, and positively affect their health. When a doctor tells a patient that they need to lose weight and exercise more, an optimistic thinker is more likely to say: "She's right. I have been eating too much junk. I am going to go back to basics and stick to foods that I know are good for me. And I am going to start walking to the store at least three times a week rather than jumping in the car every time." The optimistic thinking steers the patient in the direction of making positive changes. Because the patients believe they can take charge of their health, they put a plan into action. They may eat better, exercise more, and their health improves. It is a positive self-fulfilling prophecy.

Now, think about pessimism. The same encouragement from one's doctor would lead a pessimistic thinker to say, "Oh, what's the use. I never stick to my plans. There's no point in trying to exercise more because I know me; I'll just quit within a week!" Pessimistic thinking leads to helplessness, which leads to continued bad eating and further bad health. This is a negative self-fulfilling prophecy.

## OPTIMISM AND DEPRESSION

Although we don't fully understand all of the causes of depression, research shows that there are successful ways to treat depression and prevent it. Among these successful approaches are programs that teach children and adolescents optimism skills and techniques for increasing their resilience. By teaching school-age children how to think optimistically and how to approach problems and adversities with a clear set of coping skills, we can enable them to approach their lives with resilience and increase their overall sense of well being.

## TEACH OPTIMISM

Optimism matters and it can be learned! Parents can lay the foundation for happiness, resilience and success by teaching children how to think optimistically. For some simple strategies to help children develop an optimistic attitude, visit [www.fishfulthinking.com](http://www.fishfulthinking.com).

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