



## Think Positive! Learn To Become An Optimist

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Thank you for joining us for this discussion of optimism and how to work with your thoughts to have a more hopeful, optimistic cognitive style. We're very glad that you are with us tonight. We will be covering the points described in the outline below but, do feel free to bring up other related ideas or questions you may have during the course of our discussion. And thank you, again, for joining us!

*"Don't ever become a pessimist...a pessimist is correct oftener than an optimist, but an optimist has more fun."* –Robert A. Heinlein

*"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."* –Winston Churchill

*"It doesn't hurt to be optimistic. You can always cry later."*—Lucimar Santos de Lima

*"Many an optimist has become rich by buying out a pessimist."*—Robert G. Allen

- Let's start with a definition—what is "optimism"? How is it defined?
  - Optimism:*
    - Etymology: French *optimisme*, from Latin *optimum*, noun, best, from neuter of *optimus* best; akin to Latin *ops* power
      - ◆ 1 : a doctrine that this world is the best possible world
      - ◆ 2 : an inclination to put the most favorable construction upon actions and events or to anticipate the best possible outcome
- Isn't optimism a fixed personality trait? Aren't you naturally an optimist or a pessimist?
  - Psychologists still differ with one another with respect to identifying personality traits which are "fixed" versus learned patterns of behaving and thinking. There is no definitive proof that attributes such as optimism or pessimism are permanent, unchanging traits. Many psychologists would argue that optimism is really just a cognitive style it, a manner of explaining events to oneself which impacts upon expectations for the future.
- Are more people optimists or pessimists?
  - There is little hard data on the relative predominance of an optimistic outlook versus a pessimistic cognitive style. However, an interesting (unscientific) online survey at <http://stress.about.com> of 1,481 respondents yielded the following:

Are You An Optimist or a Pessimist?	
I'm Definitely An Optimist!	33%
If Forced To Choose, I Guess I'm Somewhat More Optimistic.	26%
If Forced To Choose, I Guess I'm Somewhat More Pessimistic.	25%
Oh, I'm A Total Pessimist!	14%

- Can optimism be measured? Can you tell the difference between an optimist and a pessimist?
  - In his book, *Learned Optimism*, Martin Seligman provides a quiz which can help you better understand your optimistic or pessimistic leanings? Or, the quiz is available online at: <http://www.stanford.edu/class/msande271/onlinetools/LearnedOpt.html>

- What's so important about "optimism"? Are there any benefits to having an optimistic outlook?
    - Optimism is, indeed, associated with some real advantages:
      - Superior Health
        - ◆ In a study of 99 Harvard University students, those who were optimists at age 25 were significantly healthier at ages 45 and 60 than those who were pessimists.
        - ◆ Other studies have linked a pessimistic explanatory style with higher rates of infectious disease, poor health, and earlier mortality.
      - Greater Achievement
        - ◆ Speligman analyzed the explanatory styles of sports teams and found that the more optimistic teams created more positive synergy and performed better than the pessimistic ones. Another study showed that pessimistic swimmers who were led to believe they'd done worse than they had were prone to future poor performance. Optimistic swimmers didn't have this vulnerability. Research like this has led some companies to go out of their way to hire optimists -- a practice that seems to be paying off.
      - Persistence
        - ◆ Optimists don't give up as easily as pessimists, and they are more likely to achieve success because of it. Some optimistic businessmen, like Donald Trump, have been bankrupt (even multiple times), but have been able to persist and turn their failures into millions.
      - Emotional Health
        - ◆ In a study of clinically depressed patients, it was discovered that 12 weeks of cognitive therapy (which involves reframing a person's thought processes) worked better than drugs, as changes were more long-lasting than a temporary fix. Patients who had this training in optimism had the ability to more effectively handle future setbacks.
      - Increased Longevity
        - ◆ In a retrospective study of 34 healthy Hall of Fame baseball players who played between 1900 and 1950, optimists lived significantly longer. Other studies have shown that optimistic breast cancer patients had better health outcomes than pessimistic and hopeless patients.
      - Less Stress
        - ◆ Optimists also tend to experience less stress than pessimists or realists. Because they believe in themselves and their abilities, they expect good things to happen. They see negative events as minor setbacks to be easily overcome, and view positive events as evidence of further good things to come. Believing in themselves, they also take more risks and create more positive events in their lives.
    - Okay, but are there disadvantages to having an optimistic cognitive style?
      - Depending upon the task being performed, pessimists may at times be more accurate and realistic in predicting future events—they tend to be more conservative and take fewer risks.
- Are optimists happier?
  - Research psychologists prefer the term "subjective well-being" to "happiness" and we are accruing considerable data identifying factors which support greater SWB. The happiness literature is huge—among the observations which appear to enjoy empirical support are the following:
    - Being extraverted, optimistic, and worry-free is associated with greater degrees of SWB.
    - The tendency to compare yourself with others is related to one's felt sense of happiness: happy people tend to use only "downward comparisons", whereas unhappy people tend to compare upward as well as downward.
    - Having personal goals is related to the experience of happiness, however it's important that these goals be realistic and attainable.
    - Wealthy people are only somewhat happier than poor people in rich nations, whereas wealthy nations appear much happier than poor ones. People tend to rather quickly adapt and become accustomed to changes in income and wealth, both increases and decreases.

- Married people tend to rate themselves at higher levels of SWB than singles, however much of this may be the product of societal and/or cultural expectations and the degree to which one is expected to have most of one's interpersonal needs met in the context of marriage.
  - The experience of "flow" on a regular basis—being engaged in a task which is compelling, perhaps leads to a conclusion and during which time you lose track of time—may be correlated with higher rates of SWB.
- In short, optimism has been identified as a feature which is associated with higher rates of reported SWJ and, importantly, it is something which can be learned and developed.

□ What is an "explanatory style"?

- In his book, *Learned Optimism*, Martin Seligman provides a detailed discussion of the roots of a pessimistic or optimistic outlook, with respect to one's explanatory style—how you account for positive or negative events. There are three main dimensions to one's explanatory style: permanence, pervasiveness and personalization:

	Optimist	Pessimist
<b>Permanence</b> --this aspect of optimism vs. pessimism is mostly about <i>time</i>	Tend to view good events as more the norm (permanence) and bad events as temporary, transient states <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When thinking about a <u>set-back or failure</u>: "I'm exhausted"; "Diets don't work when you eat out too much"</li> <li>• When thinking about a <u>good event</u>: "I'm pretty good at that—I'm talented"</li> </ul>	Tend to view good events more as temporary flukes and bad events as more the norm <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When thinking about a <u>set-back or failure</u>: "I'm all washed up"; "Diets never work"</li> <li>• When thinking about a <u>good event</u>: "I just got lucky this one time"</li> </ul>
<b>Pervasiveness</b> --this aspect of optimism vs. pessimism is mostly about <i>space</i>	Tend to view good events as universal and bad events as specific instances: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When thinking about a <u>set-back or failure</u>: "Professor Smith is obnoxious"; "This book is boring"</li> <li>• When thinking about a <u>good event</u>: "School is pretty cool." ; "This is a great company to work for"</li> </ul>	Tend to view good events as only specific instances and bad events as universal: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When thinking about a <u>set-back or failure</u>: "All professors are obnoxious"; "All books are boring"</li> <li>• When thinking about a <u>good event</u>: "This class is okay." "This area the company isn't so bad."</li> </ul>
<b>Personalization</b> --this aspect of optimism vs. pessimism is mostly about <i>assigning responsibility</i>	Tend to view good events as due to internal causes and bad events as due to external forces: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When thinking about a <u>set-back or failure</u>: "They had some unfair questions on that test.;" "The company is giving out really skimpy raises this year."</li> <li>• When thinking about a <u>good event</u>: "I tend to test well—I can handle them." ' "I earned that raise."</li> </ul>	Tend to view good events as due to external forces causes and bad events as due to internal causes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When thinking about a <u>set-back or failure</u>: "I bombed the test because I'm dumb." ; "I got a small raise because I'm a loser."</li> <li>• When thinking about a <u>good event</u>: "I did well on the test because it was easy." ; "I got the raise because everybody is probably getting them."</li> </ul>

□ Let's say you wish to become more optimistic—can you change your explanatory style? Is it possible to become more optimistic?

- The short answer is "yes!" but as you might guess, it's a bit more complicated than this simple assurance might suggest:
  - As is the case when working towards any life change (e.g., habits such as weight control, smoking, etc.), it is essential to be fully motivated, to believe in the importance of the desired change and to be prepared to work towards the desired change in a sustained way. You have to really believe that life will be better upon achieving and sustaining the desired change. You need to be sold on the benefits of optimism.

- It is important to view “optimism” not as a trait, but as a skill. It is a cognitive style, a way of explaining things to yourself, and like other skills, it can be acquired, developed, improved-upon and applied to desired situations. You need to be optimistic that you can learn to be optimistic!
- Working with your thoughts
  - Cognitive therapy has become the preferred means of working with a variety of life problems, such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse and relationship difficulties. Application of the principles of cognitive therapy can also help you to develop an optimistic outlook on life. Some of the basic ideas and interventions associated with cognitive therapy include the following:
    - Nothing changes without awareness—it is vital to slow down the pace at which you talk to yourself and learn to listen to your inner dialogue, permitting yourself a chance to dispute irrational, negative thoughts.
    - Be suspicious of your own perceptions and memories of the accuracy of past pessimistic predictions. As people, we have a very strong tendency to see what we expect to see. That is, you may have the perception that your pessimistic expectations have been confirmed in the past but it’s likely that you are not recalling, so quickly, the many times that things went better than might have been expected. Further, it’s quite possible that past negative expectations which seemed to have been “confirmed” by bad outcomes were the result of a self-fulfilling prophesy. For instance, you may have been sure that a trip to the dentist would yield terrible news about the condition of your teeth, awful pain and expense and because of this you postponed dental work, eventually confirming your pessimistic outlook when a long-overdue return to the dentist did turn out to be difficult.
    - You probably are experiencing “automatic thoughts”, wherein you quickly reach a conclusion, either positive or negative, which in turn shapes your emotional reactions to the circumstances and then impacts upon your behavior. The general areas you will want to change include:
      - ◆ Challenge negative absolutes in your thinking (e.g., “I *always* do poorly on tests”)—push-back against the pessimistic trend towards perceiving things as permanently negative. And when a set-back does occur, try to view it as an isolated learning experience.
      - ◆ Listen for the tendency to think in black-and-white terms. This happened when you quickly conclude that an entire situation is spoiled, and will continue to be negative, just because one aspect is not what you might prefer. Resist the habit of assuming pervasiveness.
      - ◆ Allow yourself to take credit for you own successes! Don’t attribute good things to powers outside of yourself. Try to shift your thinking towards taking responsibility for good stuff.
- Resources & references
  - *Learned Optimism* by Martin Seligman
  - *Breaking Murphy’s Law: How Optimists Get What They Want From Life--and Pessimists Can Too* by Suzanne C. Segerstrom
  - Online: <http://stress.about.com/od/optimismspirituality/a/optimismbenefit.htm?terms=optimism>

*Dr. John Jochem is a clinical psychologist with many years experience working with adults, adolescents, couples and families. Should you have any questions about this presentation, or wish to learn more about the range of services available through Dr. Jochem’s practice, Hawthorn Counseling Group, feel free to call Dr. Jochem at (847) 680-0755 or contact him via email at [jjochem@aol.com](mailto:jjochem@aol.com) .*