

Seeing the Glass Half Full

Actually, optimism and pessimism are learned habits. Changing the way that we think and talk to ourselves can improve our physical and emotional well-being. You too can become an optimist. But first we must understand how our thinking shapes our attitudes and outlook on life.

You feel what you think

We often assume that outside events are the cause of our moods and symptoms. But it's remarkable how different people's reactions can be when faced with the same event. Even when we experience the exact same situation at different times or in different moods, it's surprising how differently we can feel and respond to it.

We are constantly talking to ourselves. This "self-talk" is how we explain the events of our lives to ourselves. And it is the way we interpret these external events in our minds that determines how we feel and determines what actions we decide to take. Some explanations we give ourselves are positive and empowering. Others arouse anger, feed our frustration, or lead us to depression and despair.

We are usually not aware of the continuous, automatic chatter in our heads and we don't notice how these thoughts shape our mood. Learn to recognize these patterns. Specific negative thoughts lead to different types of bad moods. For example:

- Thoughts of loss like, "I've lost everything—my job, my home, and my spouse," are often followed by sadness or depression.
- Thoughts of unfulfilled expectations such as, "Why is my spouse always late?" give rise to frustration and anger.
- Thoughts of possible danger or threat like, "What if I can't find my way back?" lead to anxiety and worry.

Negative self-talk greatly limits us. If you are constantly saying to yourself, "I'm not very smart," or "I won't ever amount to much," you probably won't try to learn a new skill. That's because learning a new skill doesn't fit with what you are telling yourself. You become a prisoner of your own beliefs.

But the walls of our prison are made of thoughts, and thoughts can be changed. Self-talk is not something fixed in our biology, and our feelings are not completely out of our control. New, healthier thoughts can be cultivated.

Rose-Colored Glasses

Healthy thinkers see the world through rose-colored lenses. They distort their reality in a positive direction, and most of the time their rosy illusions benefit them. Healthy thinking is not necessarily more realistic; it's just healthier.

Optimists believe that their ability to influence events is much greater than it actually is. Most of our self-talk—either positive or negative—is simply just not true. Data from our senses is always filtered through and interpreted by our brains. We tell ourselves inaccurate stories, and then believe these stories as though they were true. So if you're going to distort reality anyway, you may as well distort it positively. It's healthier.

What Makes an Optimist?

Optimists seek out, remember, and expect positive experiences. Optimists learn to:

- Be selective, remembering mainly the positive events in the past.
- Focus on the present.
- See the future in terms of what can be done instead of what can't happen.
- See threats as challenges—problems to be solved.
- Believe the world is coherent, and their actions make a significant difference.

Optimistic thinking doesn't mean you're not touched by life's misfortunes or never have a negative thought. Even optimists don't feel great all the time. *No one enjoys losses and setbacks, but you don't have to be demolished by them either.* Optimistic, healthy thinking helps you cope better with whatever life throws at you.

You may think that optimism and pessimism are traits you're stuck with, but they're not. *To a large extent, optimism and pessimism are just learned habits. Changing the way that you think and talk to yourself can improve your physical and emotional well-being.* Remember, your body speaks its mind. You too can become an optimist. But first we must understand how our thinking shapes our attitudes and outlook on life.