

Optimistic Thinking is Healthy Thinking

Do you know someone who is generally cheerful and in a good mood, someone who looks on the bright side of things and lets bad situations roll off her back? You may be envious of this person's positive attitude and wish you were born with the same sunny disposition.

Your friend wasn't necessarily born with a positive outlook, but cultivated one through deliberate optimistic thinking. And you are not destined to be a pessimist the rest of your life. You, too, can learn to be an optimist by practicing and applying healthy, optimistic thinking.

Healthy, optimistic thinking has many (serious) benefits to your health, not the least of which is feeling good. It can help you:

- improve your mood and self-esteem
- decrease depression, anxiety, and hostility
- lessen pain and other bodily symptoms
- speed recovery from surgery
- enhance your immune function
- possibly extend your life

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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 emotion 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.

Try 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.

Optimists and pessimists explain their fortunes to themselves in completely different ways. Optimists thoroughly enjoy good events, while pessimists minimize them.

Explaining bad events

Optimists see setbacks as temporary:

- My daughter and I fought because she was in a bad mood.
- I was exhausted at the time.

Optimists see failure or adversity as specific to the immediate problem:

- I was nervous about giving the speech because the audience was so large.
- I'm not a very good skier.

Optimists explain bad events in terms of external causes:

- I caused a fender bender because all the traffic distracted me.
- I never got a good education.

Pessimists see setbacks as permanent:

- My daughter and I never get along no matter what I do.
- Things never work out for me.

Pessimists generalize the problem to their whole life:

- I was nervous about giving the speech because I always screw up.
- I'm not at all athletic.

Pessimists explain bad events by blaming themselves:

- I caused a fender bender because I'm a lousy driver.
- I'm stupid.

Explaining good events

Optimists see good events as permanent:

- I'm always lucky.
- I'm really skilled; things go easy for me.

Optimists generalize good outcomes to their whole life:

- I got the job promotion—my whole life is working well.
- I'm smart.

Optimists attribute good events to themselves:

- I know how to take advantage of luck.
- My ability made a big difference.

Pessimists dismiss good events as temporary:

- I'm just lucky today—it won't last.
- Things take lots of extra effort.

Pessimists limit good outcomes to a specific area:

- It went well at the office, but it's still a mess at home.
- I'm good at math.

Pessimists attribute good events to external causes:

- I just got lucky.
- Other people made it work.

Here are 10 questions to ask yourself when you challenge your automatic negative thoughts. Each time you discover a pessimistic thought, rethink it to reflect a more positive, optimistic story.

1. Have I really identified what's bothering me? When you are feeling badly, it's sometimes difficult to put your finger on the real cause. Review your activities for the past day or two:

- What have you been doing recently?
- With whom have you been talking?

Try to identify a specific event, situation, or encounter that might have triggered the negative thoughts that led to feeling bad.

2. Am I exaggerating the situation? Automatic thoughts often exaggerate the importance of situations and events. Put an exaggerated response into a healthier perspective. Ask yourself, "What difference will this make next week, in a year, or in 10 years?" Will anyone remember

(let alone care) that you made a stupid remark or had dandruff on your sweater a few years from now? Our mistakes are rarely fixed permanently in others' minds.

Or imagine yourself in a hot-air balloon looking back down at Earth. How important do your worries appear from that perspective?

3. Am I over-generalizing? A common mistake is to assume that because something happened once, it will happen again. The truth is, no two situations are exactly the same. You usually have a choice and can respond differently. By generalizing, you lock yourself into a future that's the same as the past.

Words like "always" and "never" are tip-offs:

- "I'm always late."
- "I'll never find another job."
- "I'll never find the right person for me."

Watch out for "all-or-nothing" or "either-or" thinking. Other common mistakes are:

- Thinking in black or white; most situations are shades of gray
- Trapping yourself between two unrealistic viewpoints ("I didn't exercise yesterday, and I've blown my regimen completely"; "I'm pretty stupid and everyone else is brilliant").

The tip-off for this type of over-generalization is words like "all," "completely," "nothing," "totally," and "always." And be aware of the labeling trap: "I'm a loser." "He's a jerk." Labels don't accurately reflect the true complexity of real people.

4. Am I over-worrying? We all worry. For example, we think things like:

- I won't get the report done on time.
- David will catch cold in that rain.
- My stomachache means I have cancer.

Ask yourself what the odds are of each of your worries coming to pass: 50 percent? 90 percent?

Most worries are just automatic thoughts with little basis in fact. We often worry about things that are very unlikely to happen. If you worry, make sure you've got a good reason. If you do, then do what you can to fix the situation. Learn how to identify stressful areas in your life and deal with them on YouTube Channel of short videos, blogs, or articles on stress management.

Make a list of your worries and check it periodically. Notice how the vast majority of your anticipated calamities never occur.

5. Am I assuming the worst? If something does go wrong, would it be a catastrophe? When you

consider the worst thing that could happen, would it truly be a disaster? Are you underestimating your ability to cope with the situation? Do you think such thoughts as:

- This turbulence means the plane will probably crash.
- I can't stand this anymore.
- This is the worst thing that ever happened to me.
- I'll lose my job if I make a mistake.

With catastrophic thinking, small events become disasters. Even big problems or crises become exaggerated. Counter your thoughts of calamity with facts and a more reasonable perspective:

- Turbulence is very common; it rarely brings a plane down.
- I'm still here, so I obviously can stand this; I just need a better way of coping.
- Worse things have happened to me.
- Everyone makes mistakes; my overall work is actually quite good.

6. Am I making an unrealistic or unfair comparison? *Remember, we face the reality our mind makes up, not reality itself.* And our minds judge by comparison: experience vs. expectation, this year vs. last, them vs. me, and so on. Our feelings about events are shaped by how much better or worse it was compared to what we expected. Once we understand how our mind works by using comparisons, we can begin to evaluate them with greater insight.

If you find yourself thinking, "I'm not a very good basketball player," for example, ask yourself: "Compared to whom?" Michael Jordan? Your next-door neighbor who played four years of basketball in college? Your 8-year-old son?

If your expectation and comparison level is unrealistic, change it. Try to get a better perspective. Tell yourself, "I play basketball as well as I can." Only one person can be president. Does that mean everybody else has to feel bad?

7. Do I have the evidence for my conclusion? You may jump to conclusions as though you know what the future holds and think, for example,

"I'll never find another job." Or you may assume you're a mind reader: "Sally thinks I'm irresponsible." That may be true, but unless you check it out with Sally, you'll never know. Or you may think: "Keith didn't smile at me. He's mad at me."

Challenge these assumptions, and use alternative responses: "I really don't know why Keith didn't smile. Maybe he didn't see me, or he was in a grumpy mood. I'll call him soon and check it out." Believing that you know what other people are thinking and feeling leads to mistakes more often than not. Don't confuse your feelings with facts.

8. Am I taking it too personally? "It's all my fault." "I'm responsible that everyone didn't have a

good time at the party." "If only I would have treated her better, she wouldn't have left me."
Are you blaming yourself for something that is not entirely under your control?

Accepting personal responsibility makes sense only when you're dealing with something you can really influence. To blame yourself because it rained on the date you chose for the party doesn't make sense. Weather, the financial markets, and the actions of others are things that you can't realistically expect to control.

9. Am I discounting the positive? Are you focusing only on the negative aspects of the situation, and ignoring the positive? Do you think things like, "She only said those nice things about me to make me feel better," or "I was just lucky"? When you filter out the positive that leaves only negative to determine your mood.

10. Am I expecting perfection? Do you really think that people should never make mistakes? If you do, you're going to be disappointed frequently. Give everyone (including yourself) a break. Making mistakes is part of being human. Why hold yourself to an impossible standard? Put your energy to better advantage rather than feeling bad. Mistakes can be opportunities to learn and grow if you don't paralyze yourself with self-blame.