



OPTIMISM - A Lost Art?

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What comes to mind when you hear the word "optimism"? Little Susie Sunshine? Pollyanna?

Optimism sometimes seems unrealistic or even childish. We all have days when we feel that way, even if only briefly. Sometimes it seems to fly in the face of reality to think positively about anything. War, terrorism, not to mention everyday issues of bills, parenting, job stress, etc all conspire against us, or so it seems. So, why be optimistic?

Well, let's define it. It is a tendency to expect the best: the tendency to believe, expect, or hope that things will turn out well. Doesn't sound like a bad thing, does it? And in fact it isn't. There are many reasons to lean toward having an optimistic outlook, such as improved health and less depression.

Benefits of Optimism

Why should we consider being more optimistic? Well, there are several benefits.

- It stands to reason that those who are optimistic have a lower incidence of depression, and we know depression has many adverse affects on our health, relationships, and achievements. So a positive outlook can have a positive influence on those areas.
- Our blood pressure is usually lower when in a positive state of mind, our muscles less tense, our breathing slower and deeper, which brings more oxygen to the brain.
- Our thoughts and mindset have a huge influence over our outlook and perspective. With pessimism, there is usually a sense of powerlessness, a learned helplessness. If I believe I will fail or that the odds are against me and I can't overcome them, then I am more likely to fail, a self-fulfilling prophecy. By the same token, if I believe I can overcome most obstacles, that I am creative and powerful in my own right, I am more likely to achieve great things. If you observe successful people, they are not always the brightest or most gifted, but the ones who believe they can.

- One of the last benefits of optimism is that it is a positive influence on others. To believe this, just walk by someone and give him or her a big smile and a happy hello and see what response you get. Do one act of kindness and see how it spreads. Optimism, just as pessimism, is contagious. Not a bad "flu" to catch!

How To Be Optimistic

There is a quote by Charles Swindoll on attitudes, part of which says "*I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it.*" Thus when we examine our outlook on life and determine whether we are optimists or pessimists, we should also keep in mind that we have control over our overall outlook, if we so choose.

A basic aspect of being optimistic is the sense we have options, choices, and that we have the capacity to act on them. This gives us hope and a sense of control, at least over ourselves. To cultivate an attitude of optimism, there are several concrete things we can do.

1. Use positive self-talk. What you say to yourself determines how you look at life.
2. Smile. It seems simple, but practiced enough it can alter your sense of well being.
3. Stay away from negative people, gripe sessions, and pity parties.
4. Cultivate a sense of humor.
5. Surround yourself with up-beat images, quotes, etc.

While studies from the University of California, Berkeley report that optimism is associated with longer life, we all know there are no guarantees. But why not aim for the stars. At the very least, you'll have a great view of life.

Optimistically Pessimistic!

To understand optimism better, let's examine pessimism a bit more closely. Pessimism is defined as the tendency to see or expect the worst aspects of all things and expecting bad or unpleasant things to happen.

Having said that, is it bad to be pessimistic? Are

there times when it is the best way to look at a situation? To some extent, looking at the possible negative outcomes can be helpful. If we acknowledge all possible results or consequences, we can prepare ourselves for any emotional fallout as well as develop a game plan.

Being ready for life events can decrease our stress and help us feel more confident. In a round-about way, anticipating negative events can help us be more optimistic due to increased confidence that we are prepared and have the skills and tools needed to handle many situations.

So, be a pessimist to get more optimistic? Not really, but it is important to have balance in how we view our world and ourselves. Either extreme carries a price. The key is to know where you are coming from and what is influencing how you are viewing the situation.

So we know that optimism has many benefits, both physical and emotional, that it can be a

conscious choice to be optimistic, that there are many concrete things we can do to increase optimism, and that it's a good thing to balance it with some pessimism.

Cultivating optimism has, I believe, only positive results. But it does take patience, as is true with developing any habit. Learning new behaviors takes time, judgment, and practice. If optimism is worth learning, it's worth the time and patience required. There are lots of pay-offs in store. So while you're working on it, remember to do a few simple things daily:

Smile a lot!

Look at mistakes as opportunities to learn valuable lessons.

Be kind to yourself and others. Usually we're all doing the best we can at any given time.

Practice, practice, practice!

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