

How to Develop an Optimistic Outlook

Optimistic people tend to believe that good things happen more often than bad things. They may face many challenges, but when they have setbacks, their positive thoughts help them cope. Research has found that optimism positively affects mental and physical health, and optimists have stronger relationships and show more of the perseverance needed to succeed at work and in life.

Experts believe that while some people seem to have been born on the sunny side of the street, others can cultivate optimism and reap the benefits of a positive outlook. In this article you'll find tips on how to become optimistic, whether you're dealing with small concerns or major challenges that involve your family, work, health, or finances.

Understanding optimism

Optimism isn't the same thing as happiness. Both optimists and pessimists may *feel* happy about something that has happened, but their *thoughts* about it may be very different. When a happy event occurs:

- *An optimist* might think, "This is one of many good things that have happened in my life. Maybe other good things will result from it."
- *A pessimist* might think, "This good feeling will never last. Look at all the bad things that have happened to me in the past."

In other words, optimism is a tendency to think about things in a positive way. Pessimism is a tendency to think about them in a negative way. Optimists and pessimists also view setbacks in different ways. Optimists consider setbacks temporary and surmountable. Pessimists think setbacks will undermine them and will be long term. These differences are important because they can affect how people respond to the setback.

Researchers have found that when optimists face a setback, they are less likely to give up, and their persistence can help them reach their goals. They have also found that even if you tend to see the glass as half empty instead of half full, you can strengthen your ability to stay optimistic and break the habit of giving up when you face challenges.

Recognizing your negative thinking

Negative thoughts aren't always unhealthy. Your fears about walking down an unlit street late at night may lead you to choose a safer route. And concerns about money may prompt you to get helpful advice from a financial professional or to increase savings to protect yourself and your family.

But certain types of negative thoughts can reduce your optimism about your future. These ideas may have a variety of causes, including inaccurate messages you've read or heard from other people.

Some common types of unhelpful negative thoughts are:

- **Overgeneralizing**, or making assumptions about yourself based on too little information.
- **Personalizing**, or blaming yourself when things go wrong, even if you don't have control over the situation.
- **Catastrophizing**, or tending to expect the worst.

- **Filtering**, or "screening out" the positive aspects of a situation and dwelling on the negative ones.
- **Splitting**. This kind of "all-or-nothing thinking" may seem to simplify your view of people or events but is restrictive and does not allow you to have a realistic view of the entire situation.

You may notice that at certain times you fall into one or more of these thought patterns—for example, when you face new challenges. If you do, strive to replace your negative thinking with positive thoughts in those situations. Don't expect overnight success. Work on changing one type of negative thought at a time instead of trying to adjust your entire outlook all at once.

Tips on staying optimistic

You can develop a more positive outlook by taking steps every day to change how you think. This process may take time, especially if you see yourself as a pessimist or are facing unusually large challenges. But you may see a difference right away just by doing a few simple things regularly.

Here are tips on building more optimism into your life:

Be aware of your negative thoughts. Pull back from time to time and listen to the messages you're sending yourself. If you have negative thoughts about a situation you can't change, try to replace them with positive ones. For example, you may say something like, "I can handle this," when you are in a situation that you cannot change. What you can change is how you view the situation.

Engage in positive self-talk. Create alternate responses to the negative thoughts you would like to overcome, and consider writing those responses down. For example, if you think, "I'll never be able finish that project," try, "I'll break it down into manageable parts." If you think, "I don't know how to do that," try, "I have a chance to learn something new."

Bring more humour into your life. Tap into the power of laughter to banish gloomy thoughts. Rent funny movies, hang a cartoon up on your bulletin board, or enjoy the jokes or humorous songs your friends upload to Facebook or a blog.

Spend time with optimistic people. Research has found that moods and ideas can be contagious. Chronic complainers may bring you down even if you aren't aware of it. Spend as much time as you can with optimistic people who lift your spirits.

Choose happiness. Research on happiness has revealed that pursuing your unique purpose and living a meaningful life can lead to happiness. "You can use the power of decision-making to choose activities, friends, and mind-sets that will pave the way to a purposeful and happy life," according to Sanjiv Chopra and Gina Vild in their book, *The Two Most Important Days: How to Find Your Purpose - and Live a Happier, Healthier Life*.

Practice gratitude. A pessimistic outlook may cause you to lose sight of the things you're thankful for; practicing gratitude can restore the balance. Spend a few minutes each day thinking about the good things in your life or sharing them with a friend or family member. Some experts suggest that you keep a "gratitude journal" and write down the things that make you feel grateful.

Recognize what you can control. You may start to feel pessimistic if you dwell on things you can't control. Focus on doing all you can to improve what you can control.

Develop or keep up healthy routines. Optimism is easier to maintain when you feel good physically and mentally. Eat a healthy diet and get adequate sleep and exercise.

Get help if you have unwanted negative thoughts that won't go away. Your employee assistance program (EAP), a therapist, or counsellor can give you other ideas on what to do if you have persistent negative thoughts that are interfering with your work, relationships, or enjoyment of life.

You'll find more tips on how to develop or maintain your optimism in Martin E. P. Seligman's *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (Vintage, 2006).

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