

Tapping the Power of Optimism

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Topic Overview



What is optimism?

Optimism is a hopeful, positive outlook on the future, yourself, and the world around you. It is a key part of resilience, the inner strength that helps you get through tough times.

By definition, optimism helps you see, feel, and think positively. But it has extra benefits you might not know about—optimism helps keep up your physical health too.¹

You don't have to be a "born optimist" to use the power of optimism. In daily life, or when faced with a crisis, you can choose a positive viewpoint to make the most of what life brings your way.

Can you make optimism work for you?

Even if you tend to focus on the negative side of things, "realistic optimism" can work for you.

With realistic optimism, you don't just expect the best and hope that things will go well. Nor do you let yourself see and expect only the worst. Instead, you look at the "big picture," the good and the bad. You then:

- Decide what is realistic to expect.
- Decide what you can do to make things go as well as possible.
- Choose to focus on the positives, and on your strengths, as you go forward.

For example, let's say you are about to have a knee surgery. You can choose to be optimistic about your recovery, rather than let fear or hopelessness take hold. Imagine how you want to feel 6 or 12 months after surgery—strong and active. Picture what you want to be doing, how you want to be moving around. Keep these positive, hopeful pictures in your mind.

A positive attitude can also help you keep up a positive mood, which can help with healing. But optimism alone is only part of a good recovery. It's also important to know what to do, such as physical therapy exercises, and what to be careful about. And if you need support or advice, you can plan ahead with the right people before the surgery.

When practicing optimism, remember to keep a flexible frame of mind. Expect change, and be ready to adjust to it.

How can you practice optimism?

Whenever you're having trouble with thinking negative thoughts, expecting the worst, or feeling powerless, try any of these exercises for a few days.

- **Focus on what's going well.** Write down three things that have gone well in the past day. These can be large, like getting a raise, or small, like "I talked with an old friend today." Describe the cause of each event, and credit yourself for the part you played in it, such as "I made that phone call I've been putting off for a long time."
- **Practice gratitude .** Write down three things in your life that you are grateful for. This kind of focus on what enriches your life can help keep your thoughts and feelings more positive.
- **Look for the benefits.** Think of a negative event from your near or distant past. Write it down. Now think of something positive that has or could come of it. Write it down. For the positive thought, use larger handwriting or a favorite color.
- **Look ahead.** Picture yourself doing something that feels good. Expect good things to happen.
- **Build yourself up.** When you need it, lean on others or your faith to build more strength. Say to yourself often, "I am strong."

Related Information

- Practicing Gratitude
- Building Resilience

References

Citations

1. Kubzansky LD, et al. (2001). Is the glass half empty or half full? A prospective study of optimism and coronary heart disease in the normative aging study. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 63(6): 910–916.

Credits for Tapping the Power of Optimism

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