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Optimism and the Power of Positive Thinking
Change Your Thoughts. Change Your Life.

“How do you do it?” my friend asked me one day over coffee. “You’ve had some awful stuff happen to you over the years, but you’re still so cheerful. What gives?”

My friend was my right, my life had been rough at times. I’d gotten divorced and I’d been laid off a couple of times within a five-year period. I should have been angry and bitter, but I wasn’t. I was still looking forward to each new day and the possibilities ahead of me. While this was normal for me, my friend’s comment made me realize that not everybody felt the way I did. Why was I so optimistic, anyway?

The Definition of Optimism

Optimism comes from the Latin word *optimus*, meaning “best,” which describes how an optimistic person is always looking for the best in any situation and expecting good things to happen. Optimism is the tendency to believe, expect or hope that things will turn out well. Even if something bad happens, like the loss of a job, an optimist sees the silver lining. For me, getting laid off was the catalyst that allowed me to start my own business. As I packed up my office, my mind was already whirling with the possibilities ahead. Without that push, I may never have made the leap to self-employment. Losing my job was a good thing after all.

The emerging field of positive psychology studies the positive impact that optimism has on mental health. Other research shows that optimism may be good for my physical health too—optimists are sick less and live longer than pessimists. Apparently, a positive outlook on life strengthens the immune system (and the body’s defenses against illness), cardiovascular system (optimists have fewer heart attacks), and the body’s ability to handle stress.

Happiness through Positive Self-Talk

Being an optimist or a pessimist boils down to the way you talk to yourself. Optimists believe that their own actions result in positive things happening, that they are responsible for their own happiness, and that they can expect more good things to happen in the future. Optimists don’t blame themselves when bad things happen. They view bad events as results of something outside of themselves. I didn’t blame myself for losing my job, but saw it as a business decision that had nothing to do with me personally.

Pessimists think the opposite way, however. They blame themselves for the bad things that happen in their lives and think that one mistake means more will inevitably come. Pessimists see positive events as flukes that are outside of their control—a lucky streak that probably won’t happen again.

Because of their thought processes, optimists have much brighter futures. A bad circumstances or event is taken in stride, viewed as a temporary setback—not a permanent way of life. Even if something bad happens today, a positive thinker believes that good things will come again in the future.

Optimists tend to share several other positive characteristics that increase overall happiness and promote health, while reducing depression and chronic stress:

They think about, reflect on, and emphasize the good things in life.

They are grateful and thankful for all their blessings.

They don't complain when something bad happens.

They feel that nothing can hold them back from achieving success and reaching their goals.

They believe in abundance.

They are confident that the world offers plenty of opportunities for everyone to succeed.

Change Your Thinking, Change Your Life

Luckily, you can change your thinking patterns over time. Even a pessimist can become an optimist with enough practice! All you need to do is to reframe how you define events. Instead of dwelling on the bad experience, analyze it to figure out what good can come of it. Even if a project at work is deemed a failure, think about what you learned during the process. What strengths did you discover within yourself, and when can you use those talents again?

Instead of blaming yourself for the failure, think about the outside influences that may have affected your project. Maybe you were delayed by outside vendors, so you couldn't meet a deadline; or management decided to go in another direction, making your project redundant. Virtually any failure can be turned into a learning experience, which increases your potential for success in the future.

Optimism is a skill of emotional intelligence, which translates to a better career and greater success in life. Life is too short to be miserable, so start turning your thinking around! Positive thoughts, an optimistic outlook, and overall happiness can advance your prospects for work, relationships and other life experiences.

-- By Leanne Beattie, Health & Fitness Writer, SparksPeople.com