

Article by Dr. Karen Reivich, Fishful Thinking

*If I keep a green bough in my heart, the singing bird will come.* --Chinese Proverb

### What is Optimism?

Optimism is the belief that things will turn out well. It is the expectation that good things will come your way and that you have the ability to control the direction of your life. There are plenty of common phrases that capture the essence of optimism: "seeing the glass as half full," "making lemonade out of lemons," "every cloud has a silver lining." Each of these phrases captures the belief that optimism can transform a negative situation into something positive, and that optimism helps guide people to look for meaning in times of hardship.

Although optimism and pessimism often refer to how people think about the future, they also refer to how people think about the past, specifically, the causes of the good and bad events in their lives. When something bad happens - like having a fight with someone you love, or losing your job, or getting a bad grade on a test - optimistic thinkers believe that what caused the problem can be changed and they believe that problems in one area of their life won't necessarily lead to problems in all areas of their life. Pessimistic thinkers, in contrast, believe that they are the sole cause of their problems, that those problems are going to last forever, and that they are going to seep into every aspect of their lives.

For example, imagine that you had a big fight with a close friend. If you are an optimistic thinker you might say to yourself, "I wasn't listening well and she was in a bad mood. Maybe I ought to call her and see if she wants to go for a walk." If you are a pessimist thinker you might think "I'm so self-centered and I'm not a good friend to people. Well, that friendship is over!" An optimistic way of thinking sets you up to work it out with your friend and to move forward in the relationship. The pessimistic way of thinking makes you want to retreat from that relationship and probably most others too.

### Optimism is a Thinking Style

Maybe you noticed that I talk about optimistic or pessimistic thinking rather than optimistic or pessimistic people. I do that to underscore one of the most important points about optimism. Optimism is a style of thinking, not a permanent part of your character. So, just like you can change the style of clothes you wear, you can learn to change your style of thinking. This point is critical. You can learn to think optimistically. Your children can learn to think optimistically. Pessimistic thinking can be replaced with optimistic thinking. And the reason this matters is that optimism is a significant determinant of mental health, academic and work success, physical health and overall happiness.

Psychologists have long been interested in optimism and we have a good understanding of what it is and why it matters. There have been hundreds of studies of optimism and what we find is that people who think optimistically report fewer symptoms of depression, do better in school and in sports, are more productive at work, and are physically healthier than people who think pessimistically.

### Optimism and Resilience: Optimism leads to Persistence

How does optimistic thinking lead to all of these good outcomes? We know that optimism is a necessary ingredient of resilience. Research shows that part of what enables people to thrive, despite setback, failure, and hardship, is the ability to think optimistically in the face of adversity. Optimistic thinking motivates people - adults and children - to continue to persist and to work to find solutions, even when situations look bleak. Optimism shines light where it is dark. Optimistic thinkers ask themselves, "Where do I have control? What can I do to make this situation better? What can I learn from this struggle?" Because optimistic thinkers focus on control, they don't slip into helplessness. And because they persist, they tend to succeed. So, take the example of physical health. One way in which optimistic thinking leads to better physical health is quite simply that people who think optimistically believe that they can take charge of and positively affect their health. When your doctor tells you that you need to lose weight and exercise more, if you think optimistically you are more likely to say to yourself: "She's right. I have been eating too much junk. I am going to go back to basics and stick to foods that I know are good for me. And I am going to start walking to the store at least 3 times a week rather than jumping in the car every time." Your optimistic thinking points you in the direction of making positive changes. Because you believe you can take charge of your health, you put a plan into action. You eat better, you exercise more and your health improves. It is a

positive self-fulfilling prophecy.

Now, think about pessimism. The same encouragement from one's doctor would lead a pessimistic thinker to say, "Oh, what's the use. I never stick to my plans. There's no point in trying to exercise more because I know me, I'll just quit within a week!" Pessimistic thinking leads to helplessness, which leads to continued bad eating and further bad health. This is a negative self-fulfilling prophecy.

### **Optimism and Depression**

Optimism is the belief that things will turn out well. It is the expectation that good things will come your way and that you have the ability to control the direction of your life. There are plenty of common phrases that capture the essence of optimism: "seeing the glass as half full," "making lemonade out of lemons," "every cloud has a silver lining." Each of these phrases captures the belief that optimism can transform a negative situation into something positive, and that optimism helps guide people to look for meaning in times of hardship.

Although we don't fully understand all of the causes of depression, research shows that there are successful ways to treat depression and prevent it. Among these successful approaches are programs that teach children and adolescents optimism skills and techniques for increasing their resilience. By teaching school-aged children how to think optimistically and how to approach problems and adversities with a clear set of coping skills, we can enable them to approach their lives with resilience and increase their overall sense of well-being.

### **Teach Optimism**

Optimism matters and it can be learned! As a parent, you can lay the foundation for happiness, resilience and success by teaching your child how to think optimistically.

For some simple strategies to help your child develop an optimistic attitude, check out our tool box for:

### Resilience Activities

### Optimistic Activities

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