



# THE BRIGHT SIDE

OPTIMISM IS NO LONGER CONSIDERED SOMETHING WE'RE BORN WITH BUT A POWERFUL MINDSET THAT CAN BE LEARNT - HERE'S HOW TO HARNESS A HAPPIER DISPOSITION

Words: **SALLY BROWN**

Optimism is one of our most powerful forms of psychological self-defence. Defined as the expectation that more good things than bad will happen to us, it is an antidote to anxiety, coaxing us out of our comfort zone, sustaining us when we're devoting long days to a new venture, or getting up at 3am with a newborn, because it reassures us that life will be easier in the future. And because it helps lower levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, thinking optimistically has myriad health benefits – it boosts your immune system, protects your heart, and reduces your risk of stroke, ultimately helping you live longer. Think optimistically and unsurprisingly you'll build mental resilience, which staves off anxiety and depression. Optimists are more likely to eat a balanced diet, sleep well, exercise more and not smoke, and are also more likely to have longer, more satisfying relationships, and more career success.

If you're thinking that's only great news if you're naturally inclined to look on the bright side, then think again. Psychologists now believe that optimism and pessimism are mindsets rather than personality traits. The godfather of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, challenged everything we thought we knew about optimism in 1990 with his worldwide bestseller, *Learned*

*Optimism*, by presenting optimistic thinking as a skill we can all learn. Although a 2011 UCLA study has since identified a gene linked to optimism, the researchers point out that it's how a gene is expressed that counts (whether it's 'switched on') and that comes down to lifestyle, environment, mindset and habit.

Not all negativity is bad – pessimistic thinking can be protective at times. Taking an "I probably won't get it" approach to a big promotion is an instinctive way to protect against disappointment, a strategy known as 'defensive pessimism'. "Defensive pessimism is a coping strategy used to manage anxiety," says positive psychology coach Miriam Akhtar ([positivepsychologytraining.co.uk](http://positivepsychologytraining.co.uk)). "Think of it as being the embodiment of the scouts' motto, 'Be prepared'. Paying attention to all the possible things that might go wrong can make you work hard to prepare for the task ahead and avoid failure."

And there are times when optimism can work against us. "Being optimistic about the risks of reckless driving or unprotected sex, for instance, is not helpful," says psychologist Dr Ilona Boniwell, programme leader for the MSc in Applied Positive Psychology at Anglia Ruskin University. But making pessimism your default mindset, so you put a permanent negative filter on things is like living life with the brakes on. In research, pessimists report a lower quality of life than optimists. "Persistent



pessimism is a fast-track to depression,” says Miriam.

Pessimism limits your thinking, and your willingness to take risks, says positive psychology expert Vanessa King, author of *10 Keys to Happier Living* (Headline). “Pessimism narrows your attentional focus, you are in a sense solely focused on potential dangers. By contrast, when you feel optimistic, you are open to people, ideas and options, all of which generate opportunities.”

So how do you become more optimistic? There’s more to it than simply plastering on a smile in the face of adversity. “Optimism is about thinking flexibly, not thinking positively,” says Ilona. “It’s about thinking of all the different ways you can see a situation, and finding two sides to the story, then deciding which side is the more useful.” It’s this ability to think flexibly that makes optimism so effective, because it gives us the tools to search for solutions to any setbacks or problems rather than giving up – it’s thought to be one reason why most of the world’s successful entrepreneurs are optimists.

Thinking flexibly starts with a skill psychologists call ‘disputing’. “We usually internally dispute when falsely accused of something,” says Ilona. “We think, for example, ‘That’s not right. It’s him who is not listening, it’s not me.’ But when we falsely accuse *ourselves* of something we don’t tend to dispute it. If there’s a limiting belief about yourself you struggle to dispute, such as ‘I’m no good at making friends,’ ask yourself, ‘is it useful to think this way, do I have any evidence to support this?’”

An effective way to develop your ‘optimism muscle’ is to regularly spend 20 minutes writing about your best possible future self, how you would like your life to work out for the best at a point in the future, either one, five or ten years away, says Miriam. “This helps you gain insight into what’s really important and what motivates you. Plus, it can generate ideas of how to reach those goals,” she says. In research, people who did this once a week for four weeks, writing about their ‘best possible self’ in four key areas – health, career, social and academic – reported more hope about the future than a control group who wrote about a recent event diary-style once a week.

Another optimism-boosting technique is ‘mental time-travelling’. For a few minutes each day, think of three or four good things that can reasonably happen in

the next week or so, however tiny – a good conversation with a friend, reading something uplifting, enjoying a walk in the sunshine. Like being grateful for good things in advance. “Research shows it boosts mental wellbeing, and makes you more likely to pay attention to the good things when they do happen,” says Vanessa.

Training your mindset to notice good things also has positive benefits for relationships. Research from Stanford University found that just one partner having an optimistic outlook improved the chances of a couple staying together long-term. Optimists in relationships are more likely to focus on the constructive things that their partners do and say, rather than the negative, and their partners report feeling supported by them.

There’s still much we have to learn about the power of optimism. There’s currently a \$1.4 million research project underway at Cornell University in the US, the Hope and Optimism initiative ([hopeoptimism.com](http://hopeoptimism.com)), to explore why exactly optimism boosts health, and why some people are more optimistic than others. But what we do know is that, with effort, we are all capable of learning to be optimistic, believes Vanessa. “Thinking optimistically is a brain-training exercise,” she says. Is it time you gave your optimism muscle a workout? **S**

## GLASS HALF FULL OR EMPTY?

**The difference between how optimists and pessimists think is the three Ps, says positive psychologist Martin Seligman:**

- 1 Personal:** an optimist looks for external causes of negative events while a pessimist takes it personally (the difference between “we just weren’t right for each other” and “I’m no good at relationships.”)
- 2 Permanent:** an optimist sees a challenge or setback as temporary (“I haven’t met the right person yet”), while a pessimist thinks, “I’ll never meet the right person.”
- 3 Pervasive:** if they’ve been dumped, an optimist will view the relationship as a failure; a pessimist will dismiss their entire life as a failure.