



Why An Optimistic Outlook Will Make You Healthy, Wealthy and More Popular!

Roger Elliott

You would think that headline is too big a claim to back up. Think again...

Optimism is a neglected topic. Since the advent of positive thinking, it has taken a back seat in personal development and therapy circles. But optimism is different to positive thinking, and what's more, learning how to do it buffers you against depression and anxiety and, unbelievably, makes you more likely to succeed in your chosen pursuits.

The trouble with optimism is that it is seen as something unchangeable. People tend to see themselves as either 'an optimist' or 'a pessimist', and these two extremes leave no room for anything in between.

In reality, you are an optimist to a degree, and this degree changes in different situations. What's more, you can deliberately alter the way you think to increase your optimism quotient. But why should you?

The Benefits of Optimism

In one study of elderly people, their perception of their own health was found to be more important in longevity than their actual health.

This article (PDF document) cites research that shows:

- i) the immune systems of pessimists function less well than those of optimists
- ii) optimists have greater life expectancy than pessimists.

And if that's not enough for you, how about this:

People like optimists more than they do pessimists.

How do we know that? Well aside from common sense that says we like to be around people that make us feel good - (your friend telling you "Everything's ruined and it's going to get worse" doesn't usually improve your day!) - here's an astounding bit of research...

In his book 'Learned Optimism', Martin Seligman talks about the research he and his team did into the optimism levels of American Presidents. 27 out of 29 winners of the

presidential race were graded as more optimistic than their unsuccessful running opponent. I think we need say no more.

And on the subject of money, success and all that, consider these quotations:

"Success is 99% failure"

Soichiro Honda

"Genius is one percent inspiration, and ninety-nine percent perspiration."

Thomas Alva Edison

Pessimists give up more easily than optimists - after all, what's the point continuing with something if you think it will fail? Strong optimists press on and on, until they arrive at the place they 'knew' they would reach eventually - success. Or die trying.

Optimism in the Face of Adversity

The times when optimism really pays off are when you are faced with a life problem, challenge or setback. An optimistic thinking style at these times will increase your resilience, maintain hope and improve your chances of a successful or acceptable outcome.

Pessimism will tend to make you feel more anxious, depressed and hopeless, none of which will help you overcome obstacles, deal with tough situations or persevere with difficult projects.

"I'm not a pessimist, I'm a realist."

Apart from the endless, moebius-like philosophical debate on reality that could be entered into at this point, there is another, much more pertinent reason why optimism beats pessimism any day.

There is some research to show that pessimists have a more accurate take on some situations than optimists. But not the sort of situations that really matter.

In a study of students after an exam, those who were shown to have a pessimistic thinking style guessed their performance more accurately than the optimists. All well and good.

But what about the ambiguous situation presented by a relationship difficulty for example? While the pessimist might have a more 'accurate' take on the reality of the situation, the optimist will tend to persevere, and so is much more likely to overcome the problem.

The pessimist is more likely to give up early. So who is better off? Well, as long as you think relationships are worthwhile (and you'd have to be a major pessimist to think they are not), the optimist of course!

And this applies in all sorts of uncertain situations - the stuff of which life is made.

Usefulness, not Accuracy

The thing is, optimism is simply much more *useful* than pessimism in the sphere of emotions, relationships and life in general. As mentioned above, learning optimism makes life more enjoyable. Period.

Optimism tends to engender pleasant emotions, while pessimism creates unpleasant ones. And that, in essence, makes for an enjoyable life.

At least I think it does.

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