

StayHealthy™

Why Optimism Is Powerful Medicine

by Dr. Ranit Mishori

I WRITE A LOT OF prescriptions—for pills, creams, and physical therapy. One thing I can't dictate a dose of—though I wish I could—is a positive attitude. I've always suspected that patients who "look on the bright side" tend to handle medical problems better than others. They seem quicker to seek help when they need it and more motivated to follow doctors' orders. Perhaps most important, they appear to believe they're going to get healthier.

A recent issue of the journal *Circulation* provides hard evidence that optimism and health are connected. Researchers studied nearly 100,000 women over eight years, tracking how many heart attacks they suffered and how long they lived. The conclusion? Optimism is good for you.

"Optimists had a 16% lower risk of having heart attacks," says the lead author, Dr. Hilary Tindle of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. And this study, it turns out, is not the first to link optimism with better health. A 2004 study of nearly 1000 elderly Dutch people found a connection between optimism and a lower risk of death from heart disease. The reverse seems to hold true, too. Pessimists—who were followed in a 2000 Mayo Clinic study that looked at more than 800 patients over 30 years—ran

a 19% higher risk of early death than optimists.

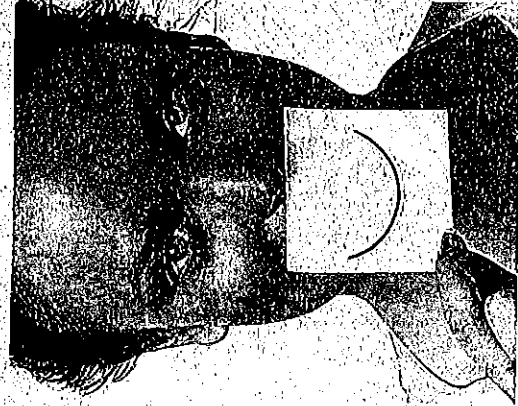
Being an optimist also has been associated with a healthier immune system and an ability to better cope with physical pain. Still other stud-

What is it about optimism that seems to allow some people to live longer, healthier lives?

The specific mechanism remains unclear, because optimism takes various forms. For example, some people express optimism as an "explanatory style" about life and its challenges. Dr. Tindle explains: An optimist of this sort will not blame himself for losing a job, fighting with a spouse, or facing a serious disease. Instead, he'll see external influences at play that may not necessarily ever happen again. Optimists are generally disposed to "positive future expectations," Dr. Tindle says. "They expect good things to happen and work toward them." So, upon being diagnosed with, say, diabetes, an optimist might exhibit a can-do attitude—by exercising, taking appropriate medications, and giving up cigarettes. These behaviors, in turn, would likely lower his chances of heart disease and high blood pressure.

By contrast, Dr. Seligman says, a pessimist "habitually views setbacks as permanent, unchangeable, and pervasive." Pessimists often feel helpless when things go wrong and tend to believe that bad luck repeats itself. Such an attitude can increase stress and contribute to depression.

Are you an optimist or a pessimist? Most people can identify



A new study links a positive attitude with better health

ies have connected a positive attitude to a quicker recovery from heart surgery and a reduced likelihood of re-hospitalization, as well as to a superior ability to handle the emotional upheaval of life-threatening illnesses like cancer.

"Optimism and pessimism affect health almost as clearly as do physical factors," says Dr. Martin Seligman, director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Are you an optimist or a pessimist? Most people can identify

themselves as one or the other. But the fact that you're naturally a pessimist doesn't mean your disposition is unalterable. Pessimists can be reformed, Dr. Seligman says, by learning new ways to think. It's called "resilience training," and, he maintains, those who take it seriously can become adept at thinking positively.

The key is learning to recognize your thought patterns. A series of tests reveals your individual explanatory style. Then, by identifying negative patterns

Even a born pessimist can learn to change

of thinking, you can learn to challenge them and replace them with positive alternatives.

Don't expect instant results, though. Resilience training usually requires work with an experienced therapist. Still, Dr. Seligman says, he has seen people who apply themselves "massively change pessimism into optimism, and do so lastingly."

Also recognize that being optimistic does not mean taking a "don't worry, be happy" view of life. In fact, being unreasonably optimistic could actually work against you. Excessively optimistic thoughts ("I won't get infected with HIV," "Smoking isn't going to give me lung cancer") obviously are not helpful. Bad things can—and do—happen to optimists.

But if you're constantly in the "glass is half-empty" camp, it's not too late to change. You don't have to wait for disease to strike to start looking at your life in a new way. Will optimism lead to better health? Perhaps. But it's also its own reward. After all, who wouldn't prefer to wake up on the right side of the bed every morning?

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