

## OPTIMISM:

### *Your Key to a Positive Attitude*

Is the glass half-full or half-empty? We consider those who call the glass half-full optimists and those who call the glass half-empty pessimists. That's a common sense definition but one that most of us recognize.

Psychologists, especially Martin Seligman, Ph.D. of the University of Pennsylvania, have actually been scientifically studying optimists and pessimists for the past 30 years, and they have learned some amazing things:

- ◆ *Optimists excel significantly more than pessimists in everything from academics to sports to sales.*
- ◆ *Optimists are more resilient to stress than are pessimists.*
- ◆ *Optimists are less likely to suffer from depression than are pessimists.*
- ◆ *Optimists are more resistant to infectious illness and better at fending off chronic diseases than are pessimists.*
- ◆ *Optimists are more hopeful than are pessimists.*
- ◆ *Optimists are better able to bounce back from setbacks than are pessimists*
- ◆ *Optimists do not get discouraged easily. When they fail, they see it as a learning experience rather than the end of the world.*

## PERMANENCE

### **& PERVASIVENESS:**

### *How you interpret life events does make a difference*

When bad things happen to optimists, they automatically assume that the bad things are a temporary state of affairs and that they won't interfere with other areas of their lives. Conversely, when bad things happen to pessimists, they automatically assume that the bad things are a permanent state of affairs, which will bleed over to other areas of their lives.

When good things happen to optimists, they automatically assume that the good things are going to last and that they will positively affect other areas of their lives. On the other hand, pessimists assume that the good things are not going to last and that they are specific only to that area of their lives.

Optimists assume responsibility for the good things in their lives and feel like they have control. Pessimists often think that the good things that occur in their lives are more the result of luck or other outside forces than the result of their own efforts and exercise of control over their lives.

The same event can happen to two people. A pessimist might say, "This is terrible! My life is ruined—nothing's ever going to work out!" An optimistic might say, "Wow, this is pretty bad, but it will pass. It's great that other parts of my life are going well."

## LEARNED OPTIMISM

### *Becoming more positive*

The good news is that you can learn to become more optimistic if you're not. To paraphrase the Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus, *we are not troubled by events but by the meaning we give them.*

For instance, suppose you fail a quiz. Does this mean that you are going to fail the course? Does it mean that your academic career is over and you might as well hang up getting a good job or going to graduate school? Of course not! If you believe this, you are engaging in pessimistic, catastrophic thinking. So, what can you do about it?

- ◆ **Distract yourself.** *Think of something else by focusing on what is happening in your life that is good.*
- ◆ **Be your own lawyer.** *Learn to argue with yourself by disputing these kinds of irrational beliefs and thoughts. Disputation is more powerful than distraction because if you successfully dispute a belief or thought, it is less likely to recur.*
- ◆ **Get professional help.** *The MSU Student Counseling Center has people who care and who are trained to help you become more optimistic and successful.*

### **For more information:**

Seligman, M.E.P. (1998). *Learned Optimism*. 2nd ed. New York: Pocket Books (Simon & Schuster).

## Test Your Optimism

Check the box next to each question only if you can answer "yes" to the question.

- 1. When something good happens to you, do you tend to think that good things will continue?
- 2. When something good happens to you, do you tend to think that it will positively affect other areas of your life?
- 3. Do you usually feel hopeful about the your life and the future?
- 4. When something bad happens to you, do you tend to think that bad things will continue?
- 5. When something bad happens to you, do you think that it will negatively impact other areas of your life?
- 6. Do you usually feel hopeless about your life and the future?

Questions 1, 2, & 3 get 1 point for each checked box. Questions 4, 5, & 6 get -1 points for each checked box. Total your score.

2 or 3 = These scores suggest that you are generally an optimistic person.

-1 to 1 = These scores suggest that you could benefit by learning optimism skills.

-2 to -3 = These scores suggest that you are generally a pessimistic person and could benefit by learning optimism skills.

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John has been working with adults, teenagers, and families since 1986. He is a National Certified Counselor (NCC) and a National Certified School Counselor (NCSC), certified by the National Board for Certified Counselors, a certifying agency that recognizes counselors who have distinguished themselves through meeting the board's rigorous standards for education, knowledge, and experience.

John is a member of the Mississippi Counseling Association, the Mississippi School Counselors Association, the Mississippi Licensed Professional Counselors Association, the Internal Family Systems Therapy Association, and the American School Counseling Association.

In addition to his graduate education, he has had additional training in Positive Psychology, Adlerian Psychotherapy, Stress Management, Internal Family Systems Therapy, Counseling and Spirituality, Solution-Oriented Brief Therapy, Theophostic Counseling, and Neuro-Linguistic Programming.

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