

RESOLVED - Be more optimistic - Maintaining a hopeful outlook on life can affect your health

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There is not much to inspire optimism these days. Buildings collapsing, planes crashing, stocks falling. Yet, this is a perfect time to reap huge health rewards from resolving to be optimistic.

So, if you can squeak out only one New Year's resolution for your health, make it this one. Become or stay (you lucky dogs) optimistic.

Yeah, yeah, you say. Been there, done that. No, you have not. I am not talking about seeing the glass half full versus half empty or looking for the silver lining in the cloud. That's not what optimism really is.

Applying the trite messages of those clichés is not what will save your life. Optimism is more than being in a good mood or being "up." Yes, optimism does involve positive feelings, but more importantly, optimism is how you see and explain the past, what you expect of the future, and what you believe about yourself and the world.

People who are optimistic do not believe circumstances put them in a fix and search for solutions. Optimists do not see misfortune as permanent or pervasive elements of their lives. They master the ability to control bad situations with answers and apply those skills to future events, secure in the knowledge that bad things will not last.

Pessimists, as if I had to tell you, blame themselves, figure bad things always happen to them, and that they will never figure a way out.

Being optimistic is really about what you expect of yourself and of your life. And recent research has proved that your expectations have far-reaching health consequences.

In medicine there is something called the "placebo effect." This is when doctors give patients a fake, inactive medicine, usually to prove that the real one works in a clinical study. Patients don't know they are taking a fake pill, they know only that they are being treated with medicine, and they "expect" it to work. And you know what? A large percentage of the patients taking a placebo get better simply because they expect to.

Still not convinced? Consider what research has uncovered:

- * Optimists recover faster from bypass surgery.
- * Optimists have better immune systems.
- * Optimists have lower blood pressure.

- * Optimists have less depression.
- * Optimists have decreased risk for heart disease.
- * Optimists have better lung function.
- * Optimistic women are resistant to postpartum depression.

So you're not an optimist. Well, it's not your fault, and you can do something about it. You and everything about you is a combination of learning and genetics. You are influenced by how people around you behaved and responded to you as a child and by your own early experiences with positive and negative events.

Dr. Martin Seligman, the world's undisputed expert on optimism and health, believes we can learn to be optimistic. He teaches parents how to lay the important foundations of optimism in their children. He says children can learn that setbacks are normal and can be overcome by our own actions. It takes practice to build optimism, but just like working with weights to build a muscle, you can build your optimism muscle.

Believe me, I know. You see, my husband, a clinical psychologist, and I are writing a book on health and emotions and one of the elements we're discussing is optimism. He, one of those lucky dogs, is an optimist by nature. I am not. As our book deadline draws near, I have found myself almost overcome with angst and dread.

"We will not make this deadline."

"I can't do this."

"We will never finish," was all I could say.

Good little pessimist that I am, I blamed myself, thought I could not figure a way out, and saw this situation as lasting forever. It took him almost two years, but my husband modeled optimistic behavior for me, chapter by chapter.

Something would go wrong, and he would point out how we got through it before, so we would get through it again. He kept saying we, even I, had the skills to master the situation, and each time it happened, my optimism muscle got stronger and stronger.

I discovered that I would not lose my job, my mind, my friends. I figured out ways to handle the challenges and move on, hopeful about my ability to overcome problems in the future.

My core beliefs haven't changed yet, but that doesn't matter for now. Some self-help programs encourage people to "act as if" they are a certain way until it becomes a reality, and that works with optimism, too. You see, you can't really tell an optimist from a pessimist anyway until they are faced with adversity, so how you cope is important to changing your style.

When challenged, pessimists focus on the negative, give up before finding a solution, and refuse to accept the reality of situations. Optimists, on the other hand, focus on the problem at hand, figure out how to solve at least some part of it, and accept aspects of situations that cannot be controlled. They even try to find the lessons and the benefits of adversity.

So if you want to keep your chin up, look on the bright side, or find the silver lining, go right ahead, but to reap the proven benefits of optimism, don't blame yourself for problems, know they won't last forever, and figure out how to master them.

Happy New Optimistic Year!

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RAISING OPTIMISTIC CHILDREN

- * Dont leave them strapped into strollers or highchairs for long periods.
- * Keep enlarging their safe play areas to include more of the house or yard.
- * Choose toys that operate in response to their actions, such as rattles or toys that sound when buttons are pressed.
- * Feed infants on demand.
- * Give them eating utensils as early as possible and allow finger foods.
- * Engage them in rudimentary steps of family chores. They can mix the batter or use the small grocery cart.
- * When they are old enough to indicate yes and no engage them in activities with choice. Never force feed them. Hold out until they actively want the food.

From article by Martin Seligman in *Parents*.

Resources: *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*, Martin Seligman

The Optimistic Child, Martin Seligman.

www.youmeworks.com an optimism resource by author Adam Khan, Self Help Stuff That Works.

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