



Look

Research shows optimists live longer, happier, more successful lives

On the bright side

BY KELLY RICE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAKI STRUNC

Get out those rose-colored glasses. *La vie en rose* is just around the corner.

If you're too pessimistic to believe that statement, there is hope for even you. According to Bob Murray, Ph.D., and Alicia Fortinberry, M.S., founders of the Uplift Program and authors of *Creating Optimism: A Proven, Seven-Step Program for Overcoming Depression*, all it takes is a little relearning. "Most children are born optimistic and stay that way until six or seven years old," says Fortinberry. It isn't until the pessimism of our culture begins to seep in that we start to lose that inborn, hopeful nature, they say.

Unfortunately, for the diehard pessimist, regaining that lost nature may not seem all that important — despite the proven benefits. According to Susan C. Vaughan, M.D., assistant professor of psychiatry at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and author of *Half Empty, Half Full*, this attitude is another product of our culture. "Optimists are often portrayed as not seeing the whole picture, whereas pessimists are often seen as sophisticated or intelligent," she says. "It's true that pessimists are often much more realistic than optimists about the risks they face each day, but the research shows it doesn't do them any good."

Murray and Fortinberry agree, noting that more and more research is showing that those who see the sunnier side of life — despite harsh realities — are much more likely to be rewarded with better health. In fact, according to one study they cite, optimists live an average of seven or eight years longer than pessimists. Research also suggests that optimists are likely to do better in school, work, and personal life than pessimists do. And, of course, they are much more likely to be happy and enjoy the life they're living.

close to those who exude positive, uplifting thoughts, and they will start to influence your attitude.

If you're currently living or working with a pessimist, Murray says you will have to be the positive influence. "Voice optimistic thoughts in the form of personal needs," he says. "For example, if someone says that one of your ideas will never work, say, 'I need you to not always point out that it'll never work,'" explains Fortinberry. "When heard on a regular basis, that person's brain will eventually take in the more positive messages."

Fish for compliments. As human beings, we need ample amounts of praise — not only for our efforts and what we've done, but also for who we are, says Murray and Fortinberry. If you don't get enough, fish for more. "People wonder if it's really genuine if they have to ask for it," says Fortinberry. "But my belief is that some people don't praise others simply because they were never praised as children and don't recognize its importance."

Believing the praise we receive is important, too, says Vaughan. "Optimists blame failures on outside circumstances and attribute successes to themselves," she says. "Pessimists do exactly the opposite."

See yourself in the driver's seat. "Optimists believe that what they do matters," says Vaughan, "and this belief causes them to take actions and precautions that pessimists generally don't." For example, optimists try to exercise and eat right in order to fend off disease — probably a major reason they tend to live longer.

Vaughan says this proactive attitude holds true for optimists even after something has gone wrong. For example, she says, a study of breast cancer survivors

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The secrets of optimists

So what separates an optimist from a pessimist? It's all state of mind. Vaughan says that optimists have difficult experiences and emotions just like everyone else. The difference is in how they handle them. "Optimists are like cats who know that they will land on their feet," she says. "No matter what happens, they are confident that it will turn out okay." You can learn to cultivate this state of mind, too, by taking the following steps.

Surround yourself with positive people.

"Emotions are highly contagious," says Vaughan. "Psychiatrists who know this schedule their upbeat, manic patients at the end of the day, so they leave the office feeling good." The same applies to the people in your life. Stay

showed that optimistic women often believed that they could control whether their cancer would recur. "And even when some of them eventually did experience a recurrence, they didn't focus on that," she explains. "Instead, they shifted their focus to other things they could control, such as their medical treatment."

Perhaps most striking is that this persevering outlook helped. On average, the optimistic breast cancer patients lived longer, had less pain, and enjoyed themselves more than the patients who were pessimistic or depressed.

Tune in to nature. Murray and Fortinberry blame much of our pessimism on television. "Reality programs promote people being voted off and ostracized," says Fortinberry. "Advertising constantly points out

Answer “yes” or “no” to the following questions.

1. I believe I am in control of my life and what happens to me.
2. When something goes wrong, I don't brood over it. I try to find a solution.
3. I can see myself achieving the things I want.
4. When I succeed at something, I believe my personal qualities or actions were responsible.
5. Most days, I can easily think of several things to be thankful for.
6. My spiritual faith is an important part of my life.
7. If I face disappointment in one area of my life, I'm aware that there are other areas where I have been successful.
8. I believe taking risks leads to good things.
9. What some people would call a mistake, I call a learning experience.
10. Even when things get stressful, I expect to succeed in the end.

Give yourself one point for every “yes” response. Then add them up.

7 to 10 points:

Your glass is half full — congratulations! Keep spreading your positive outlook to others.

4 to 6 points: You are an optimist in some situations, but not in as many as you could be. Give some of the strategies in this article a try.

0 to 3 points: Your glass is half empty. You could definitely benefit from following the seven suggestions mentioned in this article.

How full is your glass?

what we don't have and 'should' have. It creates this sense of constant failure.” Even some sitcoms, such as *Seinfeld*, have taken a decidedly pessimistic view of life, they say.

Tune in to nature instead. “Take a walk in a park; pet a dog or a cat,” says Fortinberry. “All of these things enliven the brain and lift your spirits,” says Murray.

“When you do watch television or movies,” Murray continues, “watch the ones that show good triumphing over insurmountable odds — for example, *The Lord of the Rings* or *The West Wing*. These programs show people who have values and win more often than not.”

Accentuate the positive. “Keep a record of all the good things that happen to you every day,” says Fortinberry. If you're not already aware of the positive things in your life, this practice will force you to think about them, she says.

Get spiritual. Spiritual people are more likely to be optimistic. Why? “Spirituality gives people hope,” says Murray. “Think of tribal cultures. When a drought comes, which tribe is most likely to survive? The one that believes that the circumstances are out of their control

and gives up, or the one that believes, if they do certain dances, rain will come?” The belief that something greater than you is in charge and will take care of you is inherently optimistic, he says, and it sustains people through difficult times.

Enjoy the journey. Fortinberry and Murray say we live in a culture that is overly goal-oriented. “Having goals isn't bad,” says Fortinberry, “but a lot of times people get so caught up in the outcome, they forget about the process.”

“Human beings are designed to enjoy each day, not to plan and plan for some distant happiness in the future,” says Murray. When making a goal for yourself, both he and Fortinberry recommend asking yourself whether you're doing it because you'll enjoy the process or because you're looking for something (perhaps worth or prestige) in the outcome. You are more likely to have a positive attitude if you stick to those goals that will make you happy day by day, not just once the goal is met, they say. ✕

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