

Brainbox: Cultivating optimism

As the new year beckons, Trevor Eddolls takes a timely look at optimism.

So, you're looking at a glass – is it half empty or is it half full? Or is it just a really nice glass?

Optimism is all about being hopeful and confident about the future or the success of something. But, is that the best way to approach life? Let's see what research suggests...

The health benefits of being optimistic

It appears that optimism is good for your heart. There's a story that on 12 July 1988 France beat Brazil in the World Cup final, and on that day, there were fewer cardiovascular deaths in France than the average for the previous week. And that's been attributed to a burst of optimism!

Further cardiac benefits were explored by Scheier et al (1999), who studied 309 middle-aged patients scheduled for coronary bypass surgery. They found that compared with pessimistic people, optimistic people were significantly less likely to be re-hospitalized for a broad range of problems, such as postsurgical sternal wound infection, angina, myocardial infarction, and the need for another bypass surgery. They concluded that optimism predicts a lower rate of re-hospitalization after coronary artery bypass graft surgery. And that fostering positive expectations may promote better recovery.

Similarly, optimism is good for people with high blood pressure. A Finnish study of 616 middle-aged men with normal blood pressures when the study began had their mental outlook evaluated with questions about their expectations for the future. They were also evaluated for cardiovascular risk factors such as smoking, obesity, physical inactivity, alcohol abuse, and a family history of hypertension. Over a four-year period, highly pessimistic men were three times more likely to develop high blood pressure than optimists, even after other risk factors were taken into account.

A US study of 1,306 men with an average age of 61 evaluated them for an optimistic or pessimistic outlook as well as for blood pressure, cholesterol, obesity, smoking, alcohol use, and family history of heart disease. None of them had a diagnosis of coronary artery disease when the study began. Over the next 10 years, the most pessimistic men were more than twice as likely to develop heart disease than the most optimistic men, even after taking other risk factors into account.

Looking at overall health, a study of 2,300 older adults (over 85 years old) over a 2-year period found that people with a positive outlook were much more likely to stay healthy and enjoy independent living than less cheerful people. Another study of 447 patients over a 30-year period found optimism was linked to a better outcome on eight measures of physical and mental function and health.



Optimists also live longer. A US study of 839 people concluded after a 30-year follow-up that optimism was linked to longevity. They suggested that for every 10-point increase in pessimism on an optimism-pessimism test, the mortality rate rose by 19 percent. Another US study of 6,959 students found that over the next 40 years, 476 of the people died from a variety of causes, with cancer being the most common. They concluded that pessimists had a 42 percent higher rate of death than the most optimistic students. Similarly, a Dutch study of 941 people aged between 65 and 85 found that people who demonstrated dispositional optimism at the start of the study enjoyed a 45 percent lower risk of death during a nine-year follow-up period.

Why do optimists live longer?

A 2008 study of 2,873 healthy people found that a positive outlook on life was linked to lower levels of cortisol, even after taking age, employment, income, ethnicity, obesity, smoking, and depression into account. Other possible benefits include reduced levels of adrenalin, improved immune function, and less active clotting systems.

Optimists also seem to make healthier choices. A study by Steptoe et al (2006) of people aged between 65 and 80 years found that optimism was correlated with healthy behaviours such as abstaining from smoking, moderate consumption of alcohol, the habit of walking briskly, and regular physical activity, regardless of demographical factors, current psycho-physical conditions, and body mass.

A study by Lee et al (2019) also confirmed that people with greater optimism tend to live longer than pessimists, on average. This decades-long study identified a strong correlation between optimism and 'exceptional longevity', which is described as living to age 85 or older.

Optimism and playing sport

In addition to the direct health benefits of optimism, it's also good for any athlete clients you work with to be more optimistic. An optimistic athlete is more likely to be persistent and committed during the action phase of working towards a goal and are more likely to be able to tolerate uncontrollable suffering (according to Espahbodi et al, 1991). Optimistic athletes believe that successful performance is within their control, and the reason is unchanging, i.e. they are a good player. They view an unsuccessful performance as a temporary setback that's caused by something out of their control, e.g. bad weather. This means that their self-esteem isn't impacted because they believe that they are in control of the good and not of the negative. And this, in turn leads to optimism about future positive performances.

Gordan & Kane (2001) found optimism led to better performances and less variability. An older study by Carver et al (1979) found that optimism helped athletes to overcome adversities, was motivating, and increased persistence. And Rettew & Reivich (1995) found optimism led to more wins.

Optimism and the brain

We're perhaps more interested in what's going on inside people's brains. Chang et al (2001) and Hart (2008) found an inverse correlation between optimism and depressive symptoms. And Hirsch et al (2007) found the same inverse correlation between optimism and suicidal ideation. Scheier et al (1986) found a significant positive relationship between optimism and different aspects of life, such as coping strategies focused on the problem, looking for social support, and emphasis of the positive aspects of the stressful situation.



Other research (Nes et al 2006) confirms that optimism is positively correlated with those coping strategies thought to eliminate, reduce, or manage the stressors and negatively correlated with those employed to ignore, avoid, or distance oneself from stressors and emotions.

These all go to show that helping our clients to be more optimistic is going to help them with the usual ups and downs of life.

Dr Richard Davidson, in research using functional MRI scanners and advanced EEG analysis, found that when people are emotionally distressed (anxious, angry, depressed) the most active sites in the brain are circuitry converging on the amygdalae and the right prefrontal cortex. We probably knew this. And when people are in a positive mood (upbeat, enthusiastic, and energized) there's heightened activity in the left prefrontal cortex area of the brain. Dr Davidson also found that volunteers with more left-side activity who watched amusing films had a far stronger pleasant response, while those with more right-side brain activity who watched distressing films had far stronger negative feelings.

So, positive moods are associated with more left-brain activity, and negative moods with more right-brain activity. The good news is, that by consciously altering their thought processes, our clients can literally re-wire their brain.

Research has shown that optimism is correlated with many positive life outcomes including increased life expectancy, general health, better mental health, increased success in sports and work, greater recovery rates from heart operations and better coping strategies when faced with adversity.

But where does optimism come from? Can it be learned? A study by Robert Plomin et al (1992) suggested that optimism is about 25 percent inheritable. The other 75 percent comes from other factors such as socioeconomic status, which are probably less in our control.

How can we help our clients to be more optimistic?

Dr Davidson taught mindfulness to workers in high-stress jobs who were right-prefrontal cortex users. After two months of training (for three hours each week), they moved to the

left prefrontal cortex and reported feeling less anxious, more energized, and happier.

Some other techniques you can try with clients include:

- Looking for the good – instead of highlighting the bad events, make a note of the good things. That's why we ask clients – "what's been good?". We want them to start noticing those sparkling moments. This may well train their brain to think more positively.
- Cultivating positive interactions – too often conversations with others become a moaning session or gossip fests. We need to encourage clients to be positive and mix with positive people. That will make them feel happier and more optimistic.
- Bucket emptying – to get people out of their right prefrontal cortex, we need to help them to empty their metaphorical emotional buckets. And we can do that in the usual way of helping them to relax, helping them to get a good night's sleep, and building their confidence.
- Turning off the news – your thoughts become your reality. If a client is continually thinking about all the bad news, it will lead them to have a negative and rather bleak view of the world. This will move them into their right prefrontal cortex and make them less optimistic. So, they should stop watching the news and searching the Internet for news stories (or at least cut down to the bare minimum).
- Keeping a gratitude journal – towards the end of each day, suggest your client write down a couple of things or events that happened during the day that they feel grateful for or made them feel happy. This will get them to focus on the positives of their day and cultivate an optimistic mindset.
- Help clients recognize the things they can control and the things they can't – and don't spend time worrying or ruminating about the things they can't control. Mindfulness has a technique to stop people ruminating over the things that they have found stressful during the day. People allow thoughts to enter their brain, then gently push them away without judgement.
- Help clients recognize their own talents – too often people don't see the strengths that they have used during the day, or don't remember the nice things that people have said to them during the day. To be optimistic, it's important for a person to acknowledge what they have done and when people have appreciated them.

So, does optimism or positive thinking ever have a downside? It seems the answer is sometimes. It's been suggested that negative emotions can motivate people to change things for the better for themselves and for others. And feeling a wide range of positive and negative emotions helps a person to find meaning in life and grow as a person.

Being unrealistically or overly optimistic can result in people miscalculating risks and making bad decisions. If a person is doing a dangerous sport, and they assume a risky technique will have a positive outcome for them, that can have disastrous consequences. The optimism bias is where people think events e.g. like smoking and getting lung cancer, is unlikely to happen to them. Optimism can also lead to complacency. You may hear people dismissively say, "it's fine, it'll be alright", which may be unhelpful if some action is required. Over-visualizing achieving something (e.g. getting a new job or climbing a mountain) can result in a drop in energy levels, resulting in a worse performance during the actual event. Apparently, 'extreme optimists' are less likely to clear outstanding credit card balances, save less money, and work fewer hours than even



other optimists. So being too optimistic is not helpful if beliefs or behaviours are unrealistic or potentially risky, and we should be aware of the dangers that come for clients with an overly optimistic outlook. Optimism is important but being realistic and staying in our rational brain is also important!

Unrealistic 'extreme optimism' aside, we can still conclude that being more optimistic is generally good for our clients' health, helps them to live longer, and can be better for their sporting performance. We can see that optimism can be learned and we can help clients to become less pessimistic and more optimistic – and enjoy all those benefits of cultivating optimism.

As we leave the challenges of 2020 behind, it's time to look to the horizon of 2021 and with hopeful, cautious optimism, wish that everyone has a new year filled with sparkling moments!

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