

Making a Difference – The Power of Optimism

“For myself I am an optimist - it does not seem to be much use being anything else.” (Sir Winston Churchill)

As Christians we should be the most optimistic people on the planet. The Psalmist knew this, and confidently declared... ***“My spirit, why are you so sad? Why are you so upset deep down inside me? Put your hope in God. Once again I will have reason to praise him. He is my Saviour and my God”*** (Psalm 42:11). (Psalm 56:11) ***“In God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”***

Optimism forms a core part of your emotional life. If you wish to enjoy life to the full, you will have to root out self-defeating pessimism and replace it with an intelligent form of optimism. You can only expand the vitality and energy in your life when you understand what optimism really is, why pessimism smothers you, and why certain kinds of attitudes hold you back. Optimism (like faith) is an active, empowering, constructive attitude that creates conditions for success by focusing and acting on possibilities and opportunities. Optimism is a vital ingredient for a life that is creative, productive and enjoyable.

Research shows that optimists live longer, enjoy better health, and do better in relationships, work and play.

For some, optimism comes naturally. For most, it is a positive attitude towards life that must be learned and cultivated. An optimistic person stands a better chance of making the right choice purely because he is always looking at the “up side.” On the other hand, pessimistic people are always focused on the negative and their view of life is affected by this negative perspective.

Optimism usually involves both hope and faith; therefore, it is good breeding ground for the miraculous. It inspires and empowers people to believe that they can do more and be better than they ever have before. It's a strong and very powerful quality in your spiritual, personal and professional life. Optimism is the foundation of a positive mental attitude. Optimism is the ability to find something worthwhile in every situation. It has been best defined as “a generally positive and constructive response to stress or negative circumstances.” Optimists are “Can do!” people. And if something goes wrong they simply say, *“God will work everything out together for my good.”*

Optimists focus on the future and not on the past (*Philippians 3:13*). They look for an opportunity in every difficulty. Adversity is seen as an opportunity to excel. They think on what can be done now rather than focusing on what has happened in the past (or who is to blame for it). Above all, optimists are determined enough to be solution oriented rather than problem focused. They pay more attention to finding the solution, to determining the next step, rather than sticking with the same old problem (which is a religious mind).

Optimists believe that every problem merely creates an opportunity to effect positive change. Optimism includes the assumption “With God's help, I can do something to change this situation for the better.” Defeatism or pessimism includes the assumption “There's probably nothing I do that will make any difference.” Of course, when you're optimistic, you are more willing to take action to change things for the better, which increases the likelihood that things will change for the better. That's how optimism becomes self-fulfilling; but pessimism can also become a self-fulfilling prophesy. If there is some area of your life that you have decided you cannot improve, you will no longer try, which makes it more likely that it will stay the way it is (or get worse).

Optimism is not the same as thinking positively, in fact; it is easier than thinking positively. It has far more evidence from scientific experiments proving its effectiveness than positive thinking does. More than thirty

years of research and over 500 scientific studies have shown that what you say to yourself when you experience stress and adversity - your explanatory style – directly influences your performance, your mood, and even your health.

One of the first studies on the role of pessimism in causing illness was carried out at Virginia Tech in the mid-1980s. The study, following 150 students, found that the optimists had only half as many infectious illnesses and visits to the doctor as the pessimists. Note, not only does an optimistic attitude make you more likely to succeed, it promotes better health.

Optimism benefits your health in four ways:

First, by replacing a sense of helplessness with a feeling of control, optimism boosts the immune system. Scientists believe that people who feel they have no control over their lives are more likely to get cancer than those who are in control.

Second, optimists will seek help and medical advice, and stick to health programs better than pessimists. The pessimists tell themselves “It doesn’t matter what I do.” So they give up easily and fail to seek help, information and professional advice.

Third, the more negative experiences a person encounters, the more illness he will probably suffer. If, all in one month, you lose your job, break up with your spouse, and a friend dies, your chances of becoming ill increase considerably.

Fourth, research has shown that the company of others reduces stress and consequently boost the immune system. There is a clear correlation between resilience against illness and the degree of social support. Lonely people who have no close friends or who withdraw from social engagement when unhappy, have a greater risk of illness. This is where the church community is of such great benefit.

A proverb says, “***As a man thinks, so he is***” – and this should not be terribly surprising! Not only does optimism feel good, it can also keep you in good health.

Ten tips on how to become more of an optimist.

1. The key to optimism is to maximise your successes and minimise your failures. Start by identifying and then celebrating your successes and accomplishments.
2. It’s good to look honestly at your shortcomings so you can work on them but focusing on your strengths is more beneficial.
3. Keep in mind that the more you practice challenging your negatives thought patterns, the more automatic it’ll become. Don’t expect major changes in thinking right away, but do expect them to become ingrained over time.
4. Understand that the past does not equal the future. Just because you’ve experienced pain or disappointment in the past does not guarantee that it’s all going to happen again.
5. Always remember that virtually any failure can be a learning experience, and an important step toward your next success.
6. Stop thinking about what is happening to you and start thinking about what you can make happen.

7. Look for the source of your pessimism. The sooner you can attribute your pessimism to a unique set of circumstances rather than the state of the world itself, the easier it'll be to change your perspective.
8. Be thankful - always. Make a list of the good things that have happened to you. The key to being an optimist is recognising the reality of any situation, and knowing that it could always be worse.
9. When you feel pessimism clouding your judgement, remind yourself that every minute counts, and any time spent agonising (having a pity-party) guarantees nothing but less time to enjoy whatever life might have to offer.
10. Smile a lot! Studies have shown that simply putting a positive expression on your face can actually make you feel happier and more optimistic about the future.