

Optimism and the Effects on Human Well-Being

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Optimism: *A tendency to expect the best possible outcome or dwell on the most hopeful aspects of a situation.* – The American Heritage College Dictionary

So many people today are worried about their health, finances, quality of life, relationships and all those big and small things that affect their lives. Walking down the street, looking at most people's faces, almost all of them seem depressed or sad or both. It makes me wonder if they are just having a bad day or if they are generally unhappy. Looking around in my neighborhood and among my friends, many of them have a bleak outlook on things and life in general. It seems there are much more pessimists out there than are optimists. Some of the people in my environment create their own stress by getting bent out of shape over things they have no or little influence over. There are some, like myself, who try to find the positive in any situation, and it seems they are doing much better recovering from a bad situation or illness. They also seem less stressed.

The body and the mind are linked together and can influence each other. A friend of mine, who is currently unemployed, a single mom, recently separated from her husband is under enormous stress. At the beginning of the year, when she separated from her husband, her spirits and optimism were still very high. At that point, she was already unemployed and had gone through moving herself and her two children. In the beginning, she was healthy and very optimistic about her future. She was sure that she would find work and things would work out. Time went by, she is still looking for work and her health started to deteriorate. She came down with the flu, a couple of colds, and a

stomach ulcer. She now is very pessimistic about her future. Listening to her, she has convinced herself that she will not find work and that her financial situation will get much worse. At times, it seems she is just going through the motions to keep things running for the sake of her children. She did confess to me that she has not much hope of her situation improving any time soon, if at all. She is usually a healthy person, but since her optimism has changed to pessimism, she has been sick several times this year already. She admits that she is stressing herself over her situation.

Things tend to run smoother and look brighter when your spirits are up and you are full of optimism and stress free. We seem to have more energy and we tend to be healthier. Studies, like the one by Friedman and Rosenman, show that personality does have an impact on health. Friedman and Rosenman separated people into two groups. One group, they named Type A, and the other Type B. Type A people, according to Friedman and Rosenman, are competitive, impatient, verbally aggressive, hard driving and anger-prone. Type B people are easygoing and relaxed people. In their nine-year study, 69% of the Type A's suffered heart attacks compared to none from the Type B's (Myers, 1986).

“The corticotrophin-releasing hormone (CRH) is an essential hormone shared by the central nervous system as well the immune system. It unites the stress and immune responses. CRH causes the pituitary to release ACTH into the bloodstream, which stimulates the adrenal glands to produce cortisol, the best-known stress hormone. Cortisol increases the rate and strength of heart contractions and affects many metabolic functions. Actions that help the body meet a stressful situation. Cortisol also prevents the immune system from overreacting to injuries. It also inhibits the release of CRH, which

keeps this component of the stress response under control. CRH and cortisol directly link the body's brain-regulated stress response and its immune response", (Sternberg & Gold, 1997). An imbalance of the two can lead to chronic stress and its related illnesses. Some stress is useful and can be saving our lives. For instance, if we are in a dangerous situation, the triggered stress can make us run away from that situation. Or, we encounter a snake and our response is to run away. Continuous stress however, will make us sick.

Stress can be handled in different ways. The pessimistic way, dwelling on the situation and not seeing a way out. On the other hand, is the optimistic way. Trying to relax and possibly changing the situation or approaching it from a different angle. The outlook one has on life and the obstacles that are in the way, does influence one's health. For example, if you are stressed out over a situation, your body sends out high levels of the stress hormone, which activates a chain reaction in your body. Therefore, if you stress easily over things, you are more likely to develop chronic illnesses than those who see things more relaxed. Your body does not have enough time to recover.

Optimists try to find the good in any given situation. From my experience, optimists generally have a better outlook in life, seem happier and generally cope better in difficult situations. Many years ago, when my husband and I were very young with very little money, our car broke down. We took it to my uncle's house in the hope that he could fix it. He just shook his head and told us, there is no way he could repair it and he would not let us leave with this car. It was a Sunday and we both had to be at work the next morning. My uncle's house was a good one-hour drive away from where we lived and we both depended on the car to get us to work. My husband was devastated about the news and just sat there. Since I am an optimist, and he is not, I immediately tried to think

of ways to find a solution. Somehow, deep inside, I know things will always work out one way or the other. They did that day as well. My uncle's friend owns a car dealer ship and he happened to have a cheap car for us. As soon as my husband realized there was a solution, his spirits perked right back up and his blood pressure came down. (At least we thought it did because he stopped shaking).

Optimism to me was a survival skill. Growing up, I was in an abusive home. There were times when I thought I would not or could not go on anymore and I just wanted it to end. There were times I honestly thought of ending my life because I was too little to change anything about the situation. However, somehow, I did not give up and clung to the hope that maybe tomorrow it will stop. It took a long time for tomorrow to come but eventually it did. I never gave up. The stress in my situation led me to depression and an eating disorder. Through it all, there were times where I saw a glimmer of hope and that is what I held onto.

Optimism is also linked to recovery from surgery like coronary artery bypass. Participants of the study had to fulfill certain criteria. The findings were very interesting. The study showed that optimists attained the 'milestones of recovery' faster. For example, they started walking around the room significantly earlier than pessimists did. The study also showed that the optimists were not healthier than the pessimists prior to surgery. The optimists had an overall better outlook on the outcome of the surgery. They were much more likely to be making plans and setting goals for their lives after surgery. Pessimists tended to dwell on the negative aspects like their feelings of nervousness and sadness (Scheier & Carver, 1987).

Another study by Mahler and Kulik tried to find out whether it is optimism or the lack of pessimism that influences the outcome of coronary bypass surgery. Their findings showed that 'less pessimism at discharge also predicted less pain during the later recovery periods. Optimism was reliably associated only with less pain during the earliest assessed recovery period.' 'It is possible to feel rarely pessimistic without necessarily always feeling optimistic, and vice versa.' (Mahler & Kulik, 2000).

Although it is not easy to exactly point out the effects of optimism, it is, in my opinion, safe to say being optimistic definitely enhances your over-all well-being. Looking on the brighter side of things will most likely not stress you out as much as if you were to look for the worst possible outcome of a situation. Less stress in your life greatly reduces the risk of a heart attack and other chronic diseases. With an optimistic outlook on life you will be able to handle almost any situation coming your way. Granted, it is not always easy to find the good in all situations and sometimes you have to look harder, but with an optimistic disposition it will be easier to handle.

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