

## Optimists DO Live Longer!

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No one can deny it is a tough world we live in, as evidenced by the last decade. Everywhere you look the news that sells seems to be bad news. Concerns about war, politics, employment, health and education are all around us. Good news and positive stories catch us by surprise, as they are out of the ordinary. The tendency to focus on the negative also abounds in health care professionals. We have a limited amount of time to help in a life or death situation. And so we quickly assess for what is wrong and decide what we need to do to fix it.

But this tendency to focus on problems has its limits, especially in relation to the quality of our lives. The consistent finding of recent researchers is that people with optimistic attitudes do better on a variety of measures- success at school and work, depression, goal attainment, stress response, and, longevity. UCLA psychologist Shelley Taylor and others studied 78 men with AIDS beginning in the 1980s<sup>i</sup>. Those who responded with a “realistic” view of their prognosis died an average of nine months sooner than those who were more optimistic about postponing the end. Taylor theorized that an optimistic frame of mind boosts the immune system. In a 1993 study of women with breast cancer<sup>ii</sup>, women with an optimistic disposition were more likely to acknowledge the seriousness of the disease, and took more active steps to cope with it. There was not a “Pollyanna” approach, but one that marshaled the resources to fight their illness.

Toshihiko Marutas, MD, of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester was the principal author of a study that found that how you perceive and interpret what goes on around you might affect longevity and quality of life in the later years<sup>iii</sup>. Subjects were assessed in the 1960s with a personality test, and followed up with an assessment of their health 30 years later. Pessimists reported poorer physical and mental functioning. These results came two years after a Mayo Clinic study of the data found that optimists actually live longer than pessimists<sup>iv</sup>.

This important variable known as optimism is a tendency to expect good things to happen. Is it possible to cultivate an attitude of optimism, or are we born with “happy genes”? As long as we are realistic about the boundaries we put around our areas of concern, we can adopt attitudes of positivity that will help us deal with a number of stressors in our lives. But we must first understand where we really have control. There are things we have no control over, things we can influence, and things that are fully within our control. We can be most effectively optimistic when we can control a situation and when we have influence.

The area of influence is often overlooked and dismissed as a place where we can't make a difference. Habits that maintain health are an example of influence. Exercising for 30 minutes every other day is not 100% guaranteed to avoid heart attack or diabetes, BUT science tells us that we can increase the odds if we take certain actions such as walking regularly, swimming, or working out. And increasing the odds gives us a reason to be optimistic.

Adjusting our attitude consistent with where we have control is fully within our power. And if it is within our power, why wouldn't we choose to be optimistic about the outcome? If traffic is overwhelming some mornings, reminding myself that I choose to live 45 minutes from work, and the traffic is something that accompanies my CHOICE, is a powerful message about my control, and ultimately optimism.

Although keeping an optimistic attitude is a buffer against a number of stressors, it isn't a cure-all. Other resources might be necessary. If you find yourself struggling with problems that might affect your work, give the staff at Peer Assistance Services a confidential call to find out more. PAS is a statewide peer employee assistance program to help healthcare workers with personal issues that could affect their practice- stress, depression, substance abuse, family problems for example. Whatever the problem, if it could affect your work, give us a call at 303-369-0039, ext. 209, or toll-free 866-369-0039, ext. 209. You may also visit us on the web at [www.peerassist.org](http://www.peerassist.org).

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<sup>i</sup> Reed, G.M., Kemeny, M.E., Taylor, S.E., Wang, H.-Y. J., & Visscher, B.R. (1994). "Realistic acceptance" as a predictor of decreased survival time in gay men with AIDS. *Health Psychology, 13*, 299-307.

<sup>ii</sup> Carver, C. S., Harris, S. D., Lehman, J. M., Durel, L. A., Antoni, M. H., Spencer, S. M., & Pozo-Kaderman, C. (2000). How important is the perception of personal control? Studies of early stage breast cancer patients. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 26*, 139-150.

<sup>iii</sup> Maruta T, Colligan RC, Malinchoc M, Offord KP. Optimism-pessimism assessed in the 1960s and self-reported health status 30 years later. *Mayo Clin Proc.* (2002) Aug;77(8):748-53.

<sup>iv</sup> Maruta T, Colligan RC, Malinchoc M, Offord KP. Optimists vs pessimists: survival rate among medical patients over a 30-year period. *Mayo Clin Proc.* 2000 Feb;75(2):140-3. Erratum in: *Mayo Clin Proc* (2000) Mar;75(3):318.