



# Unleash Your Inner Optimist

HOW TO TRAIN  
YOURSELF TO BE  
HAPPY AND  
HOPEFUL

*Want to put those  
negative thought  
patterns behind you?  
It may be easier  
than you think.*

By Carol  
Heffernan

**S**ee if you can relate to this: You wake up in the morning and tell yourself that today you will be a more positive person. You won't complain as much, won't let little irritations and inconveniences get to you. Today, even though confidence and hopefulness don't come naturally to you, you'll try to do as optimists do.

But within minutes, reality hits. You go online or pick up a newspaper and are bombarded with dreadful

news from around the world. You find yourself on the receiving end of a hurtful word or a critical comment, and it sends you spiraling. Before you know it, those familiar sour attitudes bubble to the surface.

For many, negative thinking comes easily. Maybe you grew up in a family of pessimists and have always been plagued by negativity. Maybe you've dealt with one difficult situation after another and

can't shake your cynical, critical outlook. Or maybe you call yourself a realist, and expect very little of yourself and others to avoid further disappointment.

Regardless of your past, you can improve your perspective—and not in a way that feels insincere or phony. Researchers say optimism and pessimism are two ends of a continuum, and where you fall is partially determined by genetics, but the rest is up to you. This means there's plenty of room for creating new habits and thought patterns.

Tamar Chansky, Ph.D., author of *Freeing Yourself from Anxiety: 4 Simple Steps to Overcome Worry and Create the Life You Want*, says it this way: "Just like it is the rare child who is chipper and delightful all of the time, those children and adults who are blessed with a naturally optimistic outlook are in the minority. But the good news is—and research supports this—anyone can learn how to think more optimistically."

To be sure, it's a worthwhile endeavor, since optimists are generally healthier, happier with their lives, and more resilient in the face of disaster or tragedy. (This explains why some people bounce back from hardship easier than others.)

The question, of course, is this: How can you change your thought patterns and learn to accentuate the positive? Here are five ways to get started:

## **INSTEAD OF:** catastrophizing (believing something is far worse than it actually is)

**TRY:** stopping yourself from predicting the worst, and then consider other, more positive outcomes

Your boss says she needs to speak with you, and you immediately assume you're going to be fired. You feel a little run-down and just know it's going to turn into pneumonia. Catastrophizing can take on many forms, including making up scenarios in your head and believing they will actually happen.

Pastor Kevin Rodney has noticed people "sinking into the abyss of negativity," especially when it comes to imagining the worst possible outcome in their own lives and our country at large. "We are all together focusing on worry and fear in part because we're surrounded by negativity every day through the news we take in," he says. "Then we discuss events with our friends and family and have few answers. We start to feel helpless and out of control,



**INSTEAD OF:** ruminating (obsessing endlessly over problems or concerns)

**TRY:** distracting yourself by doing something you enjoy

Certainly, we've all had problems eat away at us. Situations where we mentally replay the details again and again. But when something upsets you and you can't let it go, you may be fueling negativity instead of constructively thinking things through. Whether you've had a conflict with a friend or a miscommunication with your boss, choose action over repetitive analysis. Go on a walk, head to your garden, do a crossword puzzle—anything you enjoy that keeps your mind completely occupied.

Sandy Johnson, a California mother-of-two, knows hardship firsthand, having dealt with chronic health issues since childhood, as well as challenging circumstances when her daughter was a teen. "I don't allow myself to ruminate on difficult circumstances," she says. "I find this only makes my thinking become more and more negative. I think of it this way: you can go into your cave, but you don't need to stay there and decorate it."



and repeat this pattern day in and day out."

Really, the first step to dealing with catastrophizing is to recognize when you're doing it, then imagine or even write down other, less severe, possible outcomes to the situation. It's important to distinguish between a catastrophic event and a mildly unpleasant setback. Says Rodney, "I encourage people to move past small-picture thinking—seeing situations as permanent and unchangeable—and think big picture, seeing issues as temporary and changeable. Also, since almost all news reported is negative, be mindful about what you read and watch, when you do it, and how it affects your mood."

# 3

**INSTEAD OF:** thinking in extremes (using words such as “all,” “nothing,” “always,” or “never”)

**TRY:** incorporating more moderate, realistic words, such as “sometimes” and “maybe”

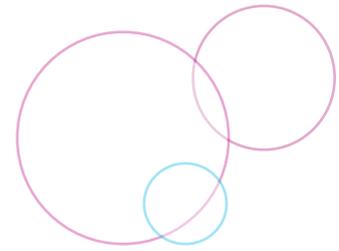
When we're thinking negatively, an overriding tendency is to see our circumstances in black and white: “I'm a lousy parent.” “Everything I do is a failure.” “I'll never measure up.” These examples of polarized thinking not only oversimplify life but also lead to damaging mood swings. Learning to let go of extreme thinking is essential to remaining more upbeat when times are tough.

Says Chansky, “Practice optimistic thinking the next time you hear yourself speaking in absolutes, using words such as ‘nobody,’ ‘everybody,’ ‘always,’ and ‘never.’ Fact-check those conclusions and see if the word ‘some’—as in some people, sometimes, some things—not only makes you feel better, but better for the right reasons. You're speaking more truthfully with yourself.”

## PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

### Exercises to Increase Your Optimism

- If you find yourself thinking critically about a relative, neighbor, or coworker, include at least one positive thought for every negative one. For example, “He always expects so much of everyone . . . but he does follow through with commitments, and I never worry about his loyalty.” The positives are always there—you just have to look for them.
- Anticipating an activity or event can bring us as much pleasure as the event itself. That's why many of us look forward to Fridays—they hold the promise and anticipation of the weekend. Write down what you're looking forward to that's happening in the next week, month, and year (One study shows vacation anticipation boosts happiness for eight weeks!), and refer to the list often, relishing in what's to come.
- Take a minute every day to write down or e-mail yourself three new things you are grateful for. After a few months, you'll automatically have trained yourself to find sources of gratitude. You can also try this: In one column, write a list of 20 positive words, and in another column, a list of 20 negative words. Challenge yourself to notice when you think or say a word from either list, focusing on replacing the negative words with the positive ones.



# 4

**INSTEAD OF:** supersizing your problems

**TRY:** shifting your perspective

Negative thinking can take a small hurdle and turn it into a problem that seems insurmountable. “Rather than getting down on ourselves for getting caught up with a little snag, we could reframe that moment (the sooner the better!), and say, ‘Right, this was my moment to be the one caught on that snag.’ Shifting out of the mode of self-accusation will help your perspective come back to you,” says Chansky.

And if you're getting stressed out about little things, that's a sign of a bigger problem, according to Chansky. “When it's the small things—bumping your knee on your desk chair, the deli forgetting to put ketchup in your French fry order, you forgetting to put your gym bag in the car on your way to work—this is a signal to you that your baseline stress level needs some help. It's so high at a resting position, that any false moves push you over to tilt. What is it you really need: to get more sleep? to make sure you don't wait till 2:00 p.m. to eat your lunch? to take a night off and catch up with your partner?”

Whatever it is that you need to change, Chansky advises to start with small changes and build from there to avoid additional stress. “We could all be easily tempted to say, ‘I need to overhaul my entire life!’” But don't get overwhelmed. Take it one step at a time.



# 5

**INSTEAD OF:** acting like a pessimist

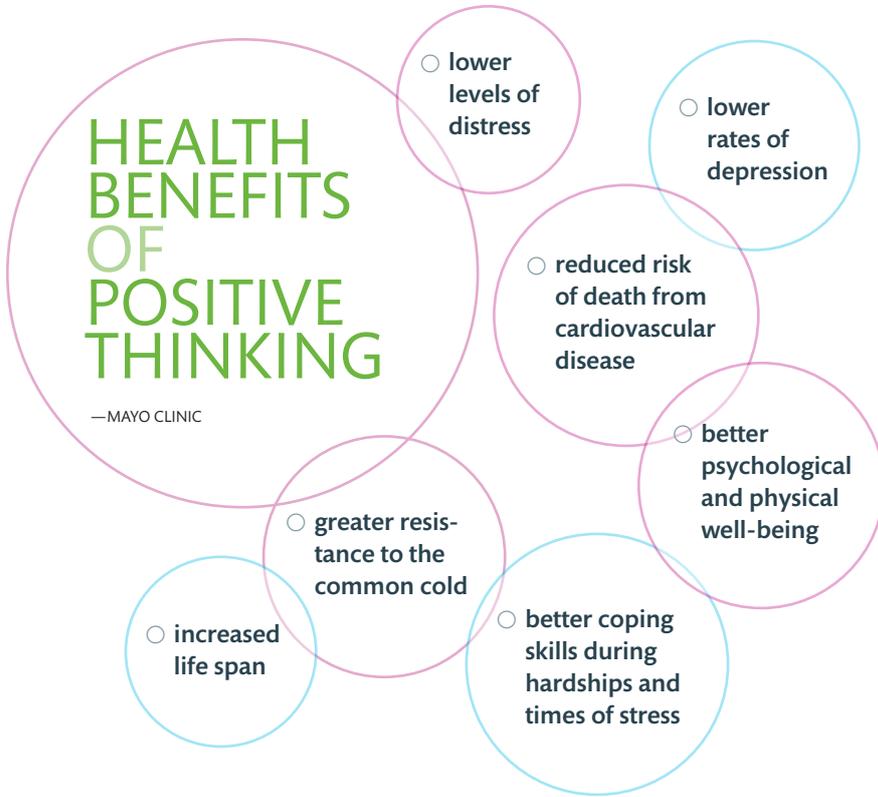
**TRY:** acting like an optimist

Becoming more optimistic may be as easy as asking yourself how an optimist would react to a situation.

And then assess how you, with your unique personality, background and strengths, can mimic those optimistic behaviors.

“I think the defining characteristic of people who are more optimistic is that they are more active and persistent in reaching their goals. They’re less likely to give up than people who are less optimistic,” says Suzanne Segerstrom, Ph.D., an optimism researcher at the University of Kentucky and author of *Breaking Murphy’s Law*. “People who approach goals or problems in an optimistic way are more likely to reach their goals or solve their problems, and that can make them feel optimistic.

“By contrast, people who approach goals or problems in a pessimistic way sometimes give up before their goals are reached or their problems are solved, and those bad outcomes can make them feel pessimistic. This phenomenon also gives a hint as to how someone who wants to feel more optimistic might approach that: Act like an optimist. That is, don’t give up so readily.” ¶



Carol Heffernan writes from Wisconsin, where she’s putting the tips from this article into practice. Especially the part about ruminating. And catastrophizing. Actually, all of it.

## HOW DO YOU STAY POSITIVE?

“I try to remember that my problems are minuscule in the grand scheme of life. I have my husband, family, faith, and my health.”

—Julie Ruiz, 34

“Looking every day for small miracles and God’s hand at work. I think what we look for, we find.”

—Deb Dominczak, 59

“Taking one thing at a time. If we lump all the bad stuff into one big ball, of course it looks hopeless. Also, seeing things in perspective—reframing something through a different lens—can help.”

—Voula Heffernan, 73

“I think it is a choice. We can’t control what happens in life, but we can choose our perspective. I choose to believe the truth about my situation, and it usually changes my perspective. For me, the truth is that God loves me, and He is bigger than any situation I am in—good or bad.”

—Holly Misener, 36

“Start every day with prayer, thanking God for all the things you are grateful for. We have so much, and we forget that. Also, complimenting or saying something nice to someone. It can be a friend or even a stranger. Sometimes we have no idea what a compliment can do to boost someone’s day.”

—Betty Nikolai, 65