

Silver linings: optimism and your health

If you think *the way* you think doesn't count for much, then think again.

Optimism is a way of seeing the world in a positive light. Optimistic people focus on the good parts of a situation and expect that good things will happen in the future.

Whether you are a 'glass half-full' kind of person can also say a lot about your health and your life choices as well. Don't believe it? This is what some of the research says:

- A large study of men and women in Finland found that those who were more optimistic exercised more regularly and ate a healthier diet with more fruits and vegetables, and were less likely to be smokers and binge-drinkers
- Another study of more than 100,000 postmenopausal women found that the optimists in the group were less likely to die from heart disease
- Various other studies have found that optimistic people, on average, have lower blood pressure, cope better with stress, are more likely to have positive body image, show better recovery from cancer and heart surgery, and are less likely to become depressed

Although the link between optimism and good health is quite strong, so far the research does not tell us what the link actually is, or exactly which factors are at play.

Some researchers believe that good health is due to the behaviour and actions that comes from optimism, rather than the thoughts themselves. Jean Hailes psychologist Dr Mandy Deeks says, "It is likely to be a combination of your thoughts, feelings, and how you react. Noticing your thoughts and feelings, challenging negative thoughts and changing how you act helps you to make better health choices. Reflecting on how it felt to act in an optimistic way is important, so if you say to yourself 'I know how good it feels when I come back from a walk', the positive result is likely to spur you on next time when it is raining!"

How can you build your levels of optimism?

"One of the best ways to boost your optimism is by getting out there and getting moving!", says Dr Deeks. A study of young and midlife women has found that exercise helps to increase levels of optimism.

The researchers believe that exercise boosts your belief in yourself, as well as what you can achieve, and through this, your general belief in success and positivity grows. Dr Deeks supports this.

"Exercise can also provide an extra boost to your self-esteem, confidence, and feelings of self-worth – and all these factors are related to optimism," says Dr Deeks. "What's more, exercise can increase endorphins and decrease stress, depression and anxiety – exercise is often social and outdoors, and this can also help to build your levels of optimism."

Dr Deeks also suggests:

- Try to be mindful and **live in the present moment**. Focus on what is good about the moment, rather than constantly thinking about what you should have said or should be doing
- Some people like to **have a positive saying** that helps them to refocus and reminds them that although things have been tough in the past they got through it – it might be something like ‘I have faced difficult times and I got through – I am okay’
- Surround yourself with **positive people**. People who are negative and draining can drain your energy and leave you feeling negative and sad
- See things that go wrong as **a challenge to learn from**. This can be difficult, says Dr Deeks, “and I have struggled with this, but when I got through some very testing situations I realised I had learnt so much about myself”
- At the end of your day, **think of three things that went well** during the day and focus on these, instead of the things that may not have gone so well

Keeping optimism top of mind

Although life will always bring its ups and down, whenever you can, try to find the silver lining in each situation. Being optimistic doesn't just improve the present moment, but could reap benefits for your health and longevity for years to come.

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