

Learned Optimism

Recently I got together with the “girls” from high school. We shared tales and updates and lamented the years that had passed so quickly. As it always goes, the talk finally came around to, “Can you believe ‘he’ is the one that has built an accounting empire,” and ‘She’ was always such a wallflower, can you believe she is the spokesperson for the President of XYZ?” It occurred to me that what we were really expressing was our surprise that our classmates had found a way to do what psychologists once thought impossible.....change personality traits.

Personality researchers have discovered that we can change some traits or qualities that were once thought to be scripted at a very young age. They have identified that some traits can be *changed* through practice. One of them is *optimism*.

Pessimists are skeptical of everything. They are certain that if there is a bad result option, it will happen to them. They think positive outcomes are for someone else and when good things do happen, they tend to overlook them or believe they are accidental.

Optimists seem to believe they are destined to suffer less, recover quicker, and have the outcome that, even if it is less than optimal, is necessary to propel them on to extreme happiness. So what difference does it make? In scientific study, optimistic people are found to be healthier, have stronger marriages, rated higher in employer surveys, and feel less helpless. They are even better liked, and considered to be more fun. Shouldn't we all want that? If you answer “Yes” to that question, and you are a pessimist, how do you morph into an optimist? The simple answer is **practice**. If that is too vague, here are some tips:

Surround yourself with other optimists: One of the fastest ways to change your attitude is to borrow one. Find people who have a positive attitude and emulate it. Remember you are practicing something you do not have much experience in.

Don't just think, act: Be aware that optimism is not just relentless cheer or “positive thinking”it is more what you do, the actions you take.

Be persistent: When at first you don't succeed, try, try again! Optimists do not give up. They learn from mistakes and keep going. They find another way and try it.

Pay attention and keep a record: When good things happen to you, acknowledge them. A great way to do that is to keep a note on your calendar. You will be surprised how many ‘good’ things happen in a week.

Bad news in small doses: No one says you should live “uninformed” but you also do not need to read every source, see every report. I recommend you pick a news resource that gives you the full extent of the news that is important to your work, family and community and leave the rest. Constant review of the same news is reinforcement! This includes blogs and rumor sessions around the water cooler.

Visualize your perfect outcome: Be clear on what you want and think through what you will need to do; by doing so, you create a map to a more hopeful state of mind. Picture the scene or outcome in every detail. See yourself performing any part you will play.

Reinforce your vision in writing: Describe your perfect outcome in writing along with the steps it will take to get there. The act of writing commits the steps to memory. You may find you move subconsciously in the direction of your thoughts. It is the same premise as a written strategic plan. Put it down, review it regularly and watch it happen!

Argue with yourself: Ask yourself, “Why not?” If you are someone who normally thinks everything is a long shot, argue, “Why?” Learn to question why you think the way you do.

Expose yourself to humor: It has been said you can only have one emotion at a time. Choose humor, then sadness and pessimistic thoughts have no place to live.

Do not expect this to be easy. Old habits die hard. The question you should ask is, “Will it be worth it?” Only you can answer that question, but remember that your attitude is a choice and if the sun shines a little brighter and you feel a little less the victim of the times and your circumstances as a result of your efforts, would it not at least be interesting?

Meet life where you find it!

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