

# Accentuating a Positive Attitude

## Can pessimists learn to see the glass half full?

Danny Worrel paid in advance to have a load of firewood delivered. It was a handshake deal, but as the guy drove off, Worrel, a 57-year-old building engineer in Coupeville, Wash., said, "I just lost \$150." He was sure the woodsman would take off with the cash and never deliver. (Of course, the firewood promptly arrived.)

This pessimistic outlook is typical of the 50% of Americans who assume things are always getting worse.

Pessimists habitually explain the events in their lives in a way that makes them seem dire. They tend to blame themselves, while assuming that whatever went wrong will stay wrong -- and bring everything else down with it.

Optimists, on the other hand, seem to approach life in a way that pays off. They're more resilient in the face of disaster or tragedy and are happier with their lives in general. But it's not all in their heads. They are generally healthier, have stronger hearts, and tend to live longer. They're even more resistant to colds.



One reason is because optimists learn to cope well and make connections with others who help and support, says Barbara Fredrickson, head of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Lab at the University of North Carolina. "You're better equipped to deal with the difficulties in life because, in the good moments, you've accrued more skills and resources," she explains.

How the brain functions seems to play a role, too. Enthusiastic people have more activity in the left prefrontal lobes of their brains, while those with more active right prefrontal lobes tend to get stuck in negative emotions. The rostral anterior cingulate cortex may be significant: One brain imaging study found that, when asked to think about future positive events, the more optimistically inclined had higher activity in this region, which is located along the midline of the brain and seems to play a role in moderating emotional reactions. Malfunctions in this area can cause depression or anxiety.

Worrel now uses a technique called "cognitive restructuring." Instead of sinking into pessimism, he asks himself whether any rational basis exists for a negative thought. If not, he forgets about it. He says, "I've realized we have control over whether that glass is half empty or half full."

### How to Be More Positive

Our brains are not hardwired for optimism or pessimism, so you can learn to accentuate the positive. Here's how:

- **Learn to meditate.** An eight-week program of daily mindfulness meditation -- trying to stay in the moment without distracting thoughts -- increased activation of the left prefrontal lobe in study subjects.
- **Think in threes.** Approximately three positive moments are needed to counteract one negative one, according to Fredrickson. So volunteer, listen to music you like, or pet a puppy.
- **Write it down.** Martin Seligman, the psychologist who authored the book *Authentic Happiness*, suggests you create a journal. Every night, write down three good things that happened that day -- and include an explanation for why each happened.

Source: WebMD.com

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WebMD the Magazine - Feature

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