

# INTRODUCTION TO OPTIMISM PRACTICE

## **What Is Optimism?**

The concept of optimism may mean different things to different people, and therefore requires a bit of unpacking. The word optimism itself comes from the Latin word *optimum*, which roughly translates to mean "best." At its core, to be optimistic is closely connected with the ability to see things in a good light, both in terms of our future as well as events that are occurring in our lives. The key type of optimism that we will be practicing in this book is referred to as dispositional optimism, and is defined as follows:

- Having hope or confidence regarding the future
- Believing that challenges and obstacles can be overcome

In other words, when we reflect on our future, do we look forward to it with anticipation, expecting that things will turn out well? Or do we nervously glance ahead with worry, believing that storm clouds are approaching? Generally speaking, optimists believe that the coming days will be positive, and that they will be able to accomplish many of their hopes and dreams. Optimism does not mean that life is without challenge or pain, and in fact a key component of optimism is to be able to see things in a realistic (rather than overly pessimistic) light.

## **Why Practice Optimism?**

We are often told to "look on the bright side" or learn to "see the glass as half full." Although these sorts of recommendations seem trivial, they nonetheless hold great truth. In short, there have now been countless studies showing both the negative consequences associated with pessimism, as well as the numerous benefits linked to optimism. By training ourselves to become more optimistic, we can reap a wide range of benefits for our mental health and physical well-being.

## **The Psychological Benefits of Optimism**

Whereas pessimism has been closely linked to a number of negative outcomes including depression, anxiety, and even suicide, optimism has been found to be among the most important ingredients for a life of happiness and well-being. Studies show that individuals who are more optimistic have lower rates of depression and anxiety, higher rates of life satisfaction and happiness, and are more resilient in the face of stress. It is thought that one of the key benefits of optimism is that it short-circuits rumination, which is strongly linked to negative mood states like depression and anxiety.

## **The Health Benefits of Optimism**

Not only are grateful individuals happier, research suggests that they are healthier as well. Studies have found that individuals who regularly practice gratitude have improved overall physical health, stronger immune systems, and reduced rates of stress-related illnesses. Not only that, but research has linked the practice of gratitude to other benefits such as getting better sleep (as much as an extra hour per night), and exercising more (as much as 90 minutes more per week).

## **The Interpersonal Benefits of Optimism**

Grateful individuals have stronger interpersonal relationships, including more satisfying romantic relationships, across a number of studies. They also are more altruistic and likely to donate to charities and engage in volunteer work, and are even more able to let go of resentments and foster forgiveness.

## **The Optimistic Brain**

Cultivating optimism impacts our brain in a number of ways according to the latest research. First, optimists tend to display greater activation in their left prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain closely linked to positive emotional states. Additionally, they show decreased sensitivity in their amygdala, the small part of our brain that fires up our fight-or-flight response during times of stress. Finally, optimists display greater activation in a region of the brain known as the orbitofrontal cortex, which is associated with helping us to better regulate our emotions and decrease our anxiety.

# OPTIMISM PRACTICE

## SLOW AND STEADY WINS THE RACE

**Duration:** 10 minutes

**Frequency:** As needed

**Level of Difficulty:** Easy

**Overview:** Pessimism often stems from feeling that we cannot possibly reach the finish line from where we are standing. We look off in the distance and see our goals, but the ground in between where we are standing and where we wish to go can feel insurmountable. But just as we cannot scale an entire ladder in one single step, we must remember that the path for reaching our goals can be a longer journey.

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu famously stated that the "journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." When it comes to fostering hope towards the future and moving towards meaningful goals, it can help to keep this spirit in mind. In this optimism-building exercise, you'll be identifying important goals that you have for the future, and breaking them up into more manageable sub-goals. Whereas the larger goals can sometimes feel unattainable (like viewing the summit of a mountain when you're just about to climb it), the steps in between can often feel much more manageable. By focusing on these instead, we can begin shifting from a place of pessimism to a more optimistic mindset.

**Instructions:** Take a moment and reflect on some of the goals and dreams you have for the future. Consider various domains of your life, including your professional life, relationships, friendships, family, and hobbies. Although reflecting on these goals can feel exciting, it can also bring about feelings of dread or pessimism particularly if they feel rather far off. To overcome this obstacle, it helps to break down our larger goals into shorter sub-goals that can be completed one small step at a time. Feel free to use the prompting questions to help get you started:

*A long-term goal I have:*

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***When I hope to achieve this by:***

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***What is the first step I need to take in order to achieve this goal?***

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***Who can I turn to for support in helping me reach this goal?***

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***If I made progress towards this in the coming weeks, what would that look like?***

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*If I made progress in the coming months, what would that look like?*

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In the process of setting sub-goals, it can help to keep in mind the concept of "SMART Goals." SMART Goals are:

**Specific**—the goal is clearly defined (e.g., who, what, where, when, and why)

**Measurable**—the goal can be tracked in terms of progress (e.g., how much, how many)

**Achievable**—the goal is attainable and realistic

**Relevant**—the goal is worthwhile and related to our larger goals and dreams

**Timely**—the goal has a time limit (e.g., when will it be accomplished by?)

By combining the focus questions contained above with the parameters of SMART Goals, you'll be well on your way to moving toward your goals!

**Notes/Impressions:**

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