

Optimism May Increase both Health and Life Expectancy

Optimistic Lifestyle

We all know people who seem to make the best of almost any situation; regardless of how bleak circumstances may seem, they are able to see a positive side and imagine a good outcome. They look at their half glass of wine and see it as half full. Then there are those who see their glass as half- empty; they perceive the worst in any adverse situation, and imagine the most negative outcome. Psychologists call these personality traits "explanatory style." A pessimistic individual interprets bad events as permanent and as pervading their entire life and future, and feels helpless to do anything about it. An optimist looks upon adversity as temporary and controllable, and affecting only a portion of their lives and future. Research has clearly shown that pessimistic individuals have more physical and emotional problems, are more frequent users of health care facilities and are more prone to depression. Studies of groups of patients with heart disease, cancer, surgery, and other illnesses have shown better outcomes in optimistic individuals than in those who are pessimistic. The most recent of these investigations comes from the Mayo Clinic. They studied over 700 patients from their outpatient internal medicine clinic who thirty years ago took a psychological test called the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI). This is a highly validated test frequently used to classify personality types. In the thirty years since being tested, two hundred of the original group had died. Those who scored only moderately higher as pessimists on the MMPI had a 20% higher mortality rate than the rest of the group. Why do optimists seem to stay healthier and live longer? We still don't know, but we do know that in animals subjected to adverse environments over which they have no control, immune function deteriorates. It may be that in humans, among other things, pessimism decreases our ability to develop or sustain immunity to infectious or malignant illness, or to summon the forces that are needed in the healing process. The Mayo Clinic investigation is ongoing, and hopefully will eventually be able to shed more light on this subject. Regardless of the exact mechanism, this research further demonstrates the connection between mind, body and spirit. It also supports, I believe, the belief that the separation of these three is somewhat artificial. One cannot be completely healthy without maintaining and nourishing all three components of one's self. Psychologists tell us that explanatory style is developed early in life, and is difficult to change once adulthood is reached. However if young people can be identified early as pessimists, behavioral treatment can possibly move them more toward the optimistic pole, and conceivably improve their physical and emotional health. As parents we spend a lot of time and energy assuring that our kids are healthy and safe, with immunizations, well-child exams, safety precautions good nutrition and hygiene. It may be just as important that we do everything we can, and seek professional help when necessary, to assure that our children develop a positive approach to life. Teaching them to perceive their glass as half-full, not half-empty, may not only enhance the quality of their life; it may help them live longer.