

Coping with College Series

Optimism and Pessimism: Is Your Glass Half Empty?

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Most pessimists can't stand optimists. Don't give them any of this "glass is half-full" stuff. They don't want to hear it. But, pessimists should know that research consistently shows that there are real benefits to optimism. Optimists are actually more likely to live longer, healthier lives. They are less likely to suffer from depression. They perform better in sports, school, and jobs. Optimists are better at fighting disease and coping with stress.

What's a pessimist to do? Go over to the light? Most pessimists resist this focus on optimism. After all, aren't optimists just glossing over all the bad stuff? Aren't optimists just naïve, fluffy-headed, ding-bats who can't see the world for what it really is? Maybe not.

It is not that optimists ignore all negative feelings or see the world through rose-colored glasses. It is not that optimists are always chipper and perky (they have a full range of emotions and moods, just like everyone). It is not that optimists are "blind" to everything bad in the world. But where pessimists see trouble, optimists see challenges:

Pessimists see negative events as their own fault. They predict the events will last a long time and will spill over into other areas of their life. For example, if a pessimistic person has a nasty fight with a friend, he may think, "I am a big jerk. She'll never forgive me. I can't do anything right!"

An optimistic person would see a negative event as being due to external factors, as a temporary setback, and as an isolated event that won't undermine everything else in her life. An optimist might interpret the fight by saying, "My friend was in a bad mood. She'll feel differently tomorrow. At least my other friends aren't angry with me."

Optimism allows you to maintain a positive attitude and expect generally good outcomes when confronted with problems. As the old saying goes, pessimists see the glass as half-empty while optimists see the same glass as half-full. Both are "accurate" statements, but the optimistic viewpoint allows you to focus on possibilities and choices. Pessimists are less likely to persevere; they give up at the sign of a struggle.

How do you know if you are being pessimistic? You can start by paying attention to the messages you are giving yourself, particularly when something bad happens. Do you always assume it is your fault, that it will last a long time, and that it will affect other parts of your life? Do friends and family frequently have to remind you to "Look at the bright side"? If so, you may have a tendency towards pessimism.

The good news is that even die-hard pessimists are not a lost cause. Dr. Martin Seligman, a leading expert in the study of optimism, believes that optimism can be learned. You can start to "catch" yourself in pessimistic thinking and replace those thoughts with more optimistic interpretations. To learn how to do this, check out Seligman's book *Learned Optimism* or recruit the help of a counselor. Just like any new skill, optimistic thinking takes practice before it becomes automatic. Don't give up. You too can break free from pessimism!