

Six Approaches to Becoming More Optimistic Today



With the negativity in the world around us, we could each use a little more positivity and optimism in our lives. Optimism is not about pretending to be happy all day every day, or to believe that your life is perfect. As Dr. Sonya Lyubomirsky (2007) puts it, optimism “is about not only celebrating the present and the past but anticipating a bright future” (p. 102). There are several benefits associated with being an optimistic person. Optimism motivates us to invest effort in reaching our goals, cope with stress in effective ways, feel energized and enthusiastic about life, and, of course, feel happier. For these reasons, optimists have been found to be more successful in professional, academic, athletic, health, and social areas of life than non-optimists (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

If positivity is not your strongest area right now, it is possible to change. This fact sheet will explain six approaches to increasing positivity.

Imagining the Future and Working to Achieve It

Imagining a bright future and setting goals to make that future a reality is one way to increase your personal level of optimism. The following steps (Lyubomirsky, 2007) may be a useful outline to follow:

1. **Ponder** – Think about what you expect your life to be like 1, 5, and 10 years from now.
2. **Imagine** – Visualize a future for yourself in which everything has turned out the way you would have wanted.
3. **Record** – Write down what your visualized future looks like. Include the long-term goals that you want to achieve.

4. **Set goals** – Break these long-term goals into sub-goals. How will you create this future? How will you be your “best self” in order to make your imagined future a reality?
5. **Identify barriers** – Write down pessimistic thoughts that act as barriers to feeling optimistic about attaining these goals.
6. **Reframe** – Consider ways that you can reinterpret these pessimistic thoughts about the situation to make them more optimistic.
7. **Repeat** – Continue to practice these steps so you can make optimism a habit.

The more effort you put into working through these steps, the more progress you will make in increasing optimism in your life. As you become your “best possible self,” you will feel empowered to make your future happen like you want it to, instead of feeling that you are a victim to others and your circumstances (Lyubomirsky, 2007, p.103-6).

Looking for the Good

When we feel a lot of stress, it can seem like we have very little control over our lives. We tend to be negative and wonder what bad thing will happen next. However, if you try looking for the good instead, and give yourself credit for having a positive influence, you will feel more in control and find better ways to solve your problems (HRMET, 2013).

One way to put this idea into action is to write down two things each day that went well. Then answer the question, “How did I make this happen?” (HRMET, 2013). Doing this right before bedtime is a good way to review the day and drift off to sleep with positive thoughts in mind. As you focus on what is going right in life, and your influence in bringing about these good things, your attitude will become more optimistic.

Savoring the Present

Many of us do not live in the present, but instead dwell on what the future could look like. In other words, we postpone our happiness. One way to stay present and be happy now is to savor the moment. Researchers define savoring as focusing on thoughts or behaviors that create, intensify, and prolong enjoyment (Seligman, 2002), or in other words, pausing to acknowledge all the good around you in that moment (Greater Good, 2017b). This can involve reminiscing on the past, relishing the present, or anticipating the future. There are several ways to do this. The goal is to find ways to enjoy the present that work

for you. A handful of strategies (Greater Good, 2017b; Lyubomirsky, 2007) are listed below to get you started:

- **Enjoy ordinary experiences** – As you go throughout your day-to-day activities and routines, try to enjoy the sights, sounds, textures, smells, and/or tastes that you are experiencing but usually overlook.
- **Transport yourself** – Make a list of some of your favorite happy memories. Choose one memory from the list. Sit down, take a deep breath, close your eyes, and begin to think about the memory. Try to picture the specific events, conversations, and people associated with this memory in your mind. Try to remember how you felt while that memory was being made. Do not put any form of judgment or comparison on the experience; just focus on the thoughts and feelings associated with the memory.
- **Celebrate good news** – Whether it is your own good news or that of someone close to you, take time to celebrate together and enjoy the moment to the fullest. Sometimes good news is accompanied by a bittersweet feeling, especially when a chapter of life is about to end. Relish both the joyful and sad feelings, as doing so will help you to savor the moment.
- **Take a savoring walk** – Set aside 20 minutes each day to go for a walk outside by yourself. As you walk, try to notice as many positive things around you as you can. Acknowledge each positive thing in your mind, and identify what it is about that thing that makes it pleasurable to you. Try walking different routes as often as possible, looking for new positive things.

Regardless of which strategy you choose, being intentional about savoring the present will benefit your life and your relationships.

Reframing the Negative

It is very easy to think negatively about the world around us. However, negative thinking does not lead us to be happy, but rather to be miserable and self-centered. In order to find more happiness, it can be helpful to learn how to “reframe.” Reframing means to replace your negative thoughts about a situation or person with positive thoughts.

Making a habit of replacing negative thinking with positive thinking takes time and practice. Below are ten suggestions (Goddard & Marshall, n.d.) for how you can develop a reframing mindset:

1. Close your eyes and picture something you have already enjoyed today.
2. Take a walk with a focus on enjoying nature and your surroundings.
3. Explore your home. Notice and appreciate things in your home that are meaningful to you.
4. Think of good people who enrich your life and list some of the ways they bless you.
5. Get a journal or notebook and write down at least two things that went well today. Make a habit of doing this every day.
6. Think over your schedule each morning and anticipate the blessings in the day ahead.
7. Review your day and see what benefits you can find in both common everyday experiences as well as in difficult experiences.
8. Call a friend and tell him or her about something you enjoyed today.
9. Celebrate the joys and successes of those around you.
10. Do not allow the irritations of the day to crowd out the positive parts.

As you seek to replace your negative thoughts with positive thoughts, you will feel more optimistic about life, as well as experience greater happiness.

Contemplating the Alternatives

Sometimes when we feel like we are in a rut in life, it helps to realize what our life would be like without the positive moments that we so often take for granted. Thinking back on these positive moments in life, and what our lives would be like without them, can increase our gratitude (Koo, Algoe, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008). In addition, recalling the happiness linked with these moments can serve as a motivation to live in a way that will lead to similar moments in the future.

Think about the answers to the following questions (Greater Good, 2017a) to see how a positive event has made a difference in your life, and what life would be like had this positive moment never occurred.

1. Identify a positive moment or event in your life.
2. What circumstances made this moment possible?
3. What could have kept this moment from happening?
4. What would your life be like if this special moment never happened?
5. What benefits have come into your life as a result of this moment happening?

6. How has reflecting on this single positive event in your life changed your feelings and perspective on life?

As you repeat these steps on a regular basis, you will become more aware of the positives and stop dwelling on the negatives in your life (Greater Good, 2017a).

Being Grateful

Dr. Robert Emmons, one of the world's top scholars on gratitude, defines gratitude as a "felt sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life" (Emmons & Shelton, 2002, p. 459). Although gratitude can be expressed in numerous ways, it involves a focus on the present moment, on appreciating life as it is today, and on what has made it that way. Gratitude helps us savor positive life experiences, boosts our confidence, helps us cope with stress, leads us to help others, strengthens our relationships, and lessens our tendency to compare ourselves with others (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Here are a few ideas to help make gratitude a more consistent part of life:

- **Gratitude letter** – Think of someone you are grateful for but have not taken the time to properly thank. Write him/her a letter expressing your feelings. This is beneficial whether you send the letter to the person or not, although delivering the letter in person to the recipient can be especially powerful in helping to increase your happiness level (Lyubomirsky, 2007).
- **Gratitude journal** – Use a notebook, phone, or computer to record 5 things you are grateful for each week. These could be people, places, objects, or experiences. Record why you are grateful for these 5 things. This can be as brief or as lengthy as you would like it to be (Lyubomirsky, 2007).
- **Three good things** – Each day, write down three good things that happened that day. This will help you focus on being grateful for today. You can keep it as a list, or if you have the time, you can make it more of a journal entry. You could reflect on and write a response to one or more of the following questions: 1) Why did this good thing happen? 2) What does it mean to me? 3) How can I increase the likelihood of having more of this good thing in my life in the future? (Seligman et al., 2009).

Regardless of which idea you decide to try, the most important thing is to be consistent. Spending a couple minutes right before you go to bed or right after you wake up might work well. If not, find a time that fits better with

your schedule, but be consistent. As you continue to record your gratitude on a consistent basis, it will become a habit. You will find yourself thinking about what you are grateful for throughout the day.

If your efforts to be more grateful become mundane and therefore lack meaning, try changing up how you express gratitude or try doing it once a week instead of each day in order to keep it special (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Conclusion

There are many ways to help yourself feel more optimistic when things are looking bleak. Try some of the ideas above to see what works best for you. Remember to be consistent. As you become more positive, you will feel happier and your relationships with others will benefit as well.

Optimism may not be a strength for you right now, but with practice, thinking optimistically will become more natural. It is about choosing to see the good in the world around you and working to bring about a bright future.

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