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Even You Can Become an Optimist!

Start now for *better health* and a *longer life*.

Optimists generally are more successful at most things in life—from business to personal relationships—than pessimists. And they probably have more fun, too. But even more importantly, there's now scientific evidence that optimists are *healthier* and *live longer*.

Recent study: A 2012 Harvard School of Public Health study found that optimistic individuals had up to 50% less risk of having a first heart attack, stroke or other cardiovascular event than their less optimistic peers.

BORN THAT WAY?

Many people believe that outlook or disposition, be it gloomy or sunny, is something you're just born with. To some extent, that's true—a person's brain tends to be wired either toward optimism or pessimism. But these tendencies are reinforced by mental habits.

Latest research: By changing how you think, live and act, it's actually possible to *change your disposition*.

RETRAIN YOUR BRAIN

Here's how you can train yourself to be more optimistic using positive emotions and experiences...

• **What makes you feel good?** Research shows that people exhibit flourishing mental health when positive emotions, such as hope,

Bottom Line/Health interviewed Elaine Fox, PhD, director of the Affective Neuroscience Laboratory in the department of psychology at the University of Essex, Colchester, UK. She is also the author of *Rainy Brain, Sunny Brain: How to Retrain Your Brain to Overcome Pessimism and Achieve a More Positive Outlook* (Basic). www.RainyBrainSunnyBrain.com



joy and wonder, exceed negative emotions, such as anger, disgust, fear, sadness and shame, by a ratio of three to one. While you can't eliminate all problems and negativity in life, you can offset them with an ample supply of things that make you feel good.

Think about simple things that make you feel positive. Maybe it's petting a dog, listening to music, working out or meeting a friend for coffee. Make an effort to include some of these things in your *daily routine*—and jot down your positive experiences in a notebook to reinforce them.

• **Live in the present.** Increasing evidence shows that *mindfulness meditation*—a practice in which you become more aware of your own sensations, thoughts and emotions without judgment—not only relaxes and calms your mind, but also boosts your ability to curb negativity.

What to do: Take a 10- to 15-minute break for mindfulness meditation several times a day. Turn off the phone and close your door, or take a walk in the park. Devote this time to tune in to the thoughts and feelings that pass through your mind and body. If upsetting thoughts enter your mind, don't dwell on them—let them simply drift away.

After adding mindfulness meditation to their routines, most people

find they're able to deal more effectively with problems and worries.

• **Act like an optimist.** Research has shown that activating the muscles used for smiling—by holding a pencil between your front teeth, for example—can boost your mood. In the same way, adopting the *behavior patterns of optimism*, even if they are not natural to you, will go a long way toward cultivating a sunnier nature. *Try the following...*

Give it a go. Optimists are not afraid to take risks or try things out. Unsuccessful results tend to be viewed as learning experiences rather than failures. And optimists are game to try again. *Example:* Go ahead and apply for your dream job.

Optimism 101

Optimists tend to be:

- **Proactive.** They take action and get things done.
- **Persistent.** They pursue goals and try again after failure.
- **Creative.** If one approach fails, they find another one.
- **Confident.** They expect things to work out in the long run.

Crucial: Optimists tend to notice and focus on the positive things in their world, such as rewarding experiences and possibilities, rather than the negative.

If you don't get it, you will be disappointed but will learn from the experience so you can try again.

Be flexible. Do something new—even if it's as minor as taking a different route on your morning run or chatting with a neighbor you usually pass by with a nod. Each positive alteration in your routine, no matter how small, helps to retrain your brain and builds the flexibility and creativity that characterize optimism.

Take command.

Optimists tend to feel a sense of control over their lives, which has been shown to reduce stress and provide other health benefits. *Best:* Increase your sense of control in small steps. For example, if you'd like to have fewer interruptions at work, you might start by curbing the number of times you check your e-mail—set aside specific times to review it, and don't look at it any other time.

Important: Recognize each small advance so you'll gain confidence to make other changes that will help you feel more in control. 📌