Cultivating optimism: How can I gain a sunnier perspective? [1]

Dear Alice,

How can I become more optimistic?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Always looking on the bright side of life [2] isn’t always as easy or breezy as people make it sound. But with a bit of persistence, patience, and practice, it’s possible to start seeing the glass as half-full. Not only will a more optimistic disposition help you feel better overall, but it can lead to increased health-promoting behaviors, more effective coping strategies, and better physical health. Some studies have even found that the sunniest among us may have higher educational attainment and incomes. These are all good reasons to opt for optimism!

Most strategies for improving optimism are based on what psychologists call ‘re-framing.’ This practice allows you to restructure your thought processes to turn maladaptive negative thoughts into more realistic, positive ones. Here are a couple of reframing strategies you might try out:

- **Visualize your best possible self.** This is a daily exercise in which you spend a few minutes envisioning yourself acting out your ‘best possible self,’ whatever that means to you. What do you want to achieve and how do you want to get there? By visualizing positive outcomes and seeing yourself succeed in your mind’s eye, psychologists believe you can increase your self-confidence [3] and, as a result, improve your optimistic outlook. Jotting down notes about your self-imagery practice in a journal might also be helpful. In experiments, consistent use of this strategy led to marked improvements in optimism. It might be time to dust off that old journal!

- **Be a detective.** Psychologists have found that the most pessimistic people tend to come up with unrealistically negative explanations for events. For example, did you really get turned down for a date because you are unattractive? Or, could it have been because the person you asked wasn’t looking for a relationship or was too busy? Being a ‘detective’ in your own life, evaluating the evidence, and coming to the most realistic understanding of why things happen can be beneficial. It has been shown to help develop resilience to stressful situations and improve your level of optimism. It’s elementary, dear reader!
If these strategies aren’t making things brighter, you may want to consider looking into professional therapy. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is aimed at helping people do just what you’re asking: become more optimistic! A CBT therapist can work with you to identify dysfunctional thought patterns and reframe distorted negative thoughts into positive ones.

Before you head off to find those greener pastures just yet, there are a few things to keep in mind. Some psychologists consider optimism and pessimism to be personality traits that can be difficult to alter, so learning to see silver linings might require persistence and patience — remember, Rome wasn’t built in a day! It’s also good to note that simply decreasing negativity does not equate to positivity. Decreasing or replacing negative thoughts while fostering positivity and constructive thinking at the same time seems to be the recipe for good cheer. Finally, to fully optimize your optimism, psychologists suggest keeping goals and expectations for yourself realistic and attainable. This may help you strike that balance of developing a more hopeful outlook while still staying grounded.

Along those same lines, don’t throw pessimism out with the bathwater. While optimism can increase confidence in your ability to succeed, what if your desired goal cannot be achieved? If used constructively when needed, a temporary dose of pessimism can also help you devise a more realistic perspective and subsequently adapt to a given circumstance. This might mean lowering your expectations in a way so that all possible outcomes in a given circumstance (even your worst-case scenarios) can be anticipated. The key here is to use pessimism to your advantage, rather than be stuck with an inflexible negative outlook.

All this to say, whether you’re looking to be more optimistic about your own life or about the state of the world, keeping tabs on your feelings — like taking the initiative to ask this question — is a positive step toward understanding and managing your mental health.

Alice!

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