

## Benefits of Optimism

So what's wrong with being optimistic? What's wrong with expecting that things may go right rather than wrong? That things may get better rather than worse? That we may ask for what we want and actually get it?

When I recently asked one of my client's this question I received a response that I have frequently heard, "Well, Doc, I don't know, I guess I'm just afraid that I'll be disappointed. Other people will think that I'm naive. I'll look foolish."

Unfortunately we often pay a high price for avoiding disappointment or preventing ourselves from looking naive or foolish. That a positive attitude affects illness has been acknowledged nationally. Using standard psychological tests to distinguish the optimist from the pessimist, doctors have shown a distinct connection between healing and frame of mind. For example, state of mind was found to be a better predictor of death than damage to the heart, artery blockage, cholesterol levels or blood pressure in a recent University of Minnesota study of 120 men. Of the 25 most pessimistic men, 21 died within eight years. Of the 25 most optimistic men, only six died. Optimists have also been found to be more likely to survive after the diagnosis of heart disease. This was revealed in a recent Duke university study of 1,719 men and women who underwent heart catheterization, a common procedure used to check the arteries for clogging. Twelve percent of those pessimistic about recovering died, compared to only five percent of those who were hopeful and optimistic.

Negative emotions also failed heart attack patients in a recent study at the Montreal Heart Institute. Pessimist were eight times more likely than optimists to die during a follow-up period of eight months. Another longitudinal study of Harvard graduates from 1939-1944 found that the more pessimistic men were more likely to have a chronic, serious disease such as arterial psoriasis by age 45 than the more optimistic graduates.

Robert Roberts, M.D., Chief of Cardiology of the Methodist Health Care System in Houston, Texas, believes that patients who expect the best "have a better chance of returning to work and are more likely to live pain free and longer. The optimist says, 'I'm still alive and I can change,' whereas the pessimist says, 'Why does it have to be me?'" (The Journal, The Methodist Hospital quarterly Magazine) Roberts goes on to say that when heart disease runs in a family, he will hear his pessimistic patients resign themselves to "destiny". When patients are told that changes in their lifestyle can prolong their life, the pessimist may see it as a "chore" while the optimist may view it as an "opportunity" to extend the quality and length of his/her life. Marty Seligman, Ph.D., in his book, *Learned Optimism*, reviewed the "balance sheet" between optimists and pessimists.

In summary he found that pessimism produced depression and inertia. This was especially true in the face of set-backs and challenges. Even when pessimists were right, when things turned out badly, they still felt worse. For them, a temporary set back became a disaster and the disaster became a catastrophe.

So is it possible to change one's attitude? Seligman and others, myself included, believe that it is. It may be hard, however. Our attitude toward life is often formed in childhood and for many of us it will be difficult to alter. A person's personality will not automatically change because they've come down with a

serious illness. Both patterns of thinking and behaving may be hard to change. Targeted psychotherapy or counseling that focuses on these attitudes can facilitate this change process. The therapy process can help you learn and develop the prime technique for learned optimism, self disputation. Examining our beliefs and attitudes and learning to identify and dispute those specific beliefs that lead to dejection and passivity will help us to cope much better with set-backs.

Here are some specific things that you can do:

When you find yourself feeling anxious or angry, ask yourself what you are saying to yourself. What do you expect to happen? Sometimes your negative expectations and beliefs will be accurate but usually they will involve distortions.

Challenge them. Question them. Don't let them run your life. Your beliefs and expectations should work for you. They should help to make your life better rather than worse.

Discard attitudes that don't work. Stop saying negative things to yourself.

Remember, the cost of pessimism is much higher than the cost of being disappointed or appearing naive.