

6 Myths About Optimism...and Pessimism

Rohnert Park Chamber of Commerce – April 12, 2021

Steven Campbell, Intelligent Heart

Optimism is among the most celebrated of human qualities. Many studies show how optimists tend to fare better in life than their pessimistic friends; at least when it comes to physical, and mental health, relationships, career, pain management. and even longevity

However...[research](#) suggests that it is NOT that straight forward.

For almost four decades, Psychologist Julie Norem has been studying the phenomenon of defensive pessimism—the cognitive strategy of setting low expectations and considering worst-case scenarios of future events.

And it turns out (and this is really interesting) that the habit of NOT getting your hopes high can help with managing anxiety and gaining a sense of control.

So, here are 6 myths about optimism and pessimism from Dr. Norem's research, and some of them are *really* surprising.

Myth 1: One is either an optimist or a pessimist.

False! People's perspectives vary from domain to domain. For example, you can be optimistic about your social life and pessimistic about your work.

These are *tendencies*—they are not deterministic of specific expectations in specific situations. In other words, they merely point us in a certain direction. It is still our choice what to do next; to choose whether the glass is half full or half empty.

Myth 2: Optimists are born, not made.

False! This myth is far too all-encompassing to be true. While we don't have much evidence that we can get rid of our tendencies to experience negative affect, cognitive [therapy](#) studies DO suggest that people can *learn* to revise how they look at situations. It's not easy, but it IS possible. Again, the choice is ours.

Myth 3: Being an optimist is always better than being a pessimist.

False! Research from Japan finds that defensive pessimists do better than optimists in terms of performance. Studies from the U.S. show that, on average, defensive pessimists do as well as optimists.

The key here is *balance*. A well-adjusted person recognizes that there are negatives and positives in most things in life and allows herself to experience both.

Myth 4. Pessimists are more likely to get depressed than optimists.

Err...this one is NOT a myth. It is true!

Pessimists ARE more at risk of depression.

However, this is complicated.

Research shows that *defensive* pessimists are less likely to get depressed than pessimists. What increases the risk of depression is when pessimism is combined with hopelessness. That is, when pessimists don't feel like they have any control over their circumstances.

Here, the distinction between defensive pessimism and fatalistic pessimism is important.

- Defensive pessimists are oriented towards making things better in their lives or getting things done.
- Fatalistic pessimists are oriented to experiencing negative emotions. However, instead of actively looking for what they could do in the world, they *assume* that they are fated to be the way they are and there is no hope. That's the pathway that leads to depression.

Myth 5. Pessimists can never be really happy.

False! Defensive pessimists certainly have many moments of happiness. They also enjoy many things in their lives.

However, happiness is not their focus! Instead, they want to avoid having regrets; and they work towards their goals. They want to feel that they did their best and they want to manage their anxiety so it doesn't interfere with their goals.

Myth 6. There are no downsides to optimism.

False! In the moment, optimism almost always looks good, because it's strongly correlated with feeling happy.

The downside of optimism comes when you look at how people plan and anticipate future events. Pessimists are never surprised when things go wrong, while optimists are

often taken aback by setbacks. An unanticipated negative outcome is usually experienced as more negative than if one was expecting it. If you are always expecting wonderful things to happen and you are continuously disappointed. That's not very adaptive.

John McCain famously wrote about optimists suffering the most in prison camps. They kept telling themselves that they would be free by a certain date, and when that never happened, they got deeply depressed. That's a very extreme case, but it does capture part of the premise. The other risk of optimism is that always thinking positively might make you overconfident, and in turn, lead you to ignore potential risks and problems that you need to take seriously.

Being Be More Optimistic During the Hard Times.

It is easy to be optimistic when things are good, but what do you do when they're not?

The real question should be, "How do you *think* when things are hard? "

So this last part comes from Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman, and his studies on "Learned Optimism" as reflected in his book by the same name.

He has discovered that optimists think in three ways when facing the hard stuff.

1. Isolate – When things get hard, optimists isolate the hard stuff. They DO deal with it, but they also remember that the hard stuff is NOT the only thing in their lives.
2. Temporalize – Optimists acknowledge that life is a moving picture; that things change ALL the time, and that tomorrow will NEVER be the same as today.
3. We can choose – Optimists ALWAYS have the option of choosing whether the glass is half empty or half full.

Wow!