



Optimism May Have Life-Extending Benefits

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Do you believe that happy thoughts will make everything better, that “every cloud has a silver lining,” and that no matter how awful life gets, “there’s a light at the end of the tunnel?” Or are you at the other end of the spectrum, believing that thinking the worst of everything and everyone will better prepare you for inevitable disappointment and that the light at the end of the tunnel is likely a train? For year, researchers have been studying optimists and pessimists, and they have found that an optimistic outlook carries certain advantages. Optimistic people are better achievers, are more resilient in the face of difficulties and cope with stress more easily than their more negative counterparts. And now, there appears to be one more reason for wearing those “rose-colored glasses”—a longer, healthier life!

In a new study, researchers at the University of Pittsburgh reviewed questionnaires that surveyed the personality traits of more than 100,000 women aged 50 and over who are participants of the Women’s Health Initiative, an ongoing government study that began in 1994. They tracked the women’s rates of death and chronic health conditions for an average of eight years. What they found was a strong link between optimism and a person’s risk for cancer, heart disease and early death.

Women who were found to be optimistic, those who said they expected good rather than bad things to happen, were 14 percent less likely to die from any cause and 30 percent less likely to die from heart disease compared to pessimists. Women who were highly mistrustful of other people, a group they called “cynically hostile,” were 16 percent more likely to die from any cause and 23 percent more likely to die from cancer. Optimists were also less likely to have high blood pressure, diabetes or smoke cigarettes.

Even when the team weeded out potentially contradictory factors such as health status and lifestyle, they still came up with the same findings. “Taking into account income, education, health behaviors like (controlling) blood pressure and whether or not you are physically active, whether or not you drink or smoke, we still see optimists with a decreased risk of death compared to pessimists,” says Dr. Hilary Tindle, lead author of the study and an assistant professor of medicine at the University. “I was surprised that the relationship was independent of all of these factors.”

Tindle proposes several possible explanations for the increase in longevity, which she hopes to validate in further trials: optimistic people may have a larger social network and more friends that they can rely on in times of crisis; they also tend to cope better with stress, a risk factor that has been associated with high blood pressure, heart disease and early death in previous studies; or it may simply be that optimists make



more regular visits to the doctor and follow medical advice more faithfully than pessimists, giving them a better opportunity to stave off life-threatening illness. “Our study reveals interesting findings. Now we need to replicate them and find out why this association is happening,” says Tindle.

So, where does optimism come from? For some lucky people, being optimistic comes naturally. But experts say that for those who aren’t as fortunate, **optimism is an attitude that can be learned and practiced.** By avoiding negative environments, making every effort to seek the company of positive individuals and celebrating your strengths instead of bemoaning your weaknesses, even pessimists can begin to exercise their optimistic muscle. Just remember: It’s better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

<http://www.healthnews.com/family-health/mental-health/optimism-may-have-life-extending-benefits-2762.html>

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