



# **OPTIMISM:** TAPPING ITS POSITIVE POWER

The secret for better health and productivity

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# Introduction

It seems that looking on the bright side and seeing the glass as half-full and not half-empty may be more than just positive mantras. These characteristics may represent psychological health fixes that enable us to be more productive and live longer, healthier lives.

Optimism, or the habit of expecting the best possible outcome from any given situation, has been proven to:<sup>1</sup>

- increase life expectancy
- improve the immune system
- prevent chronic disease
- increase success in the workplace
- increase success in sports
- aid in faster recovery from major surgery
- enable better coping strategies when faced with adversity.

‘[Optimism] not only creates happier and healthier employees, it improves productivity and resilience and reduces absenteeism’

The 2017 World Happiness Report studied more than 150,000 people living in 155 countries and it showed that irrespective of the language spoken or the country people lived in, those who expressed positive emotions tended to report better health and wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> The report ranked 155 countries from happiest (Denmark) to least happy (Burundi).<sup>2</sup>

The idea that happiness has a role to play in better health and wellbeing is slowly gaining momentum across the globe. Various countries have adopted different strategies to encourage optimism across their populations.

- The United Nations has called on member states to place more emphasis on happiness as a measurement for social and economic development.<sup>2</sup>
- Bhutan instituted a Gross National Happiness Index, which measures happiness based on a range of factors including the likes of psychological wellbeing, ecology, health, and education.<sup>2</sup>
- The United Arab Emirates appointed a Minister for Happiness who is tasked with promoting happiness and a positive attitude in life amongst its people.<sup>2</sup>
- Venezuela created a vice ministry of Supreme Social Happiness.<sup>2</sup>
- Ecuador created a State Secretary of “buen vivir”, or good living.<sup>2</sup>

1. Positive Psychology, 'The Psychology of Optimism and Pessimism: Theories and Research Findings', October 2014  
2. Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 'World Happiness Report 2017', 2017

## Why should happiness levels matter to the employer?

Studies indicated that a happy and motivated workforce could improve employee productivity by 12%.<sup>3</sup> Gratitude is an associated measure of optimism and it has been determined that grateful people are generally happier, less stressed and less depressed. This paper examines how creating a culture of optimism is mutually beneficial to the employee and employer.

Although a pessimistic attitude may seem so deeply rooted as to be permanent, the good news is that it is escapable. Pessimists can learn to be optimists.

Forward thinking employers are taking this insight and applying it to the workplace by helping their employees learn a new set of cognitive skills.<sup>3</sup> They are finding that this not only creates happier and healthier employees, it improves productivity, resilience and reduces absenteeism.<sup>3</sup>

This paper also provides practical suggestions for creating a workplace that is conducive to developing confident, hopeful, optimistic and resilient employees and promotes a sense of wellbeing.

A happy motivated workforce could improve employee productivity by

**+12%**



3. Journal of Labor Economics, 'Happiness and Productivity,' October 2015

# Putting the positivity into optimism

A workplace filled with employees that feel undervalued or helpless can be a significant problem for an employer. In such an atmosphere, problems rather than solutions can become the focus of attention and people might devolve responsibility for solving issues because they don't believe that they can deliver change.

In such a state, employees are likely to get depressed, achieve less at work than their talents might warrant and reduce the vitality of their immune systems.

The positive or negative 'lens' that employees use to view a situation shapes their reality, their happiness and every other outcome. Before attempting to change that lens, employers need to identify optimism and pessimism as traits in the workforce.

## The making of an optimist<sup>1</sup>

Optimism is a state of mind, a belief that the outcome of an endeavour will be good. Optimists are defined as expecting the best possible result from any given situation. This is usually referred to as 'Dispositional Optimism'. It reflects a belief that future conditions will work out for the best.

This doesn't mean that optimists do not face hardships. They do and when they do, hardships are seen as 'learning experiences' and even the most miserable day always holds the promise for them that 'tomorrow will probably be better'. In the workplace, optimists react to problems with confidence, believing negative events are temporary, limited in scope (instead of pervading every aspect of a person's life) and manageable.

## The perpetual pessimist<sup>1</sup>

Pessimism is characterised by a negative mental disposition, where people tend to view problems as internal, unchangeable, and pervasive. Pessimists are defined as tending to believe that bad events will last a long time, undermine their actions and are their own fault. Negativity may appear to be a great defence mechanism: If you keep your expectations low enough, you won't be crushed when things don't work out. But recent research has revealed that the tendency to be a wet blanket in just about any situation — a trait the experts call 'Dispositional Pessimism' — doesn't merely ruin a good time, it seems that it's a bad strategy by about every measure.

Researchers believe that at the core of pessimism is another phenomenon, that of helplessness.<sup>4</sup> Helplessness is a state of mind that occurs when a person believes nothing they might actively choose to do will affect what will actually happen. But it is important to remember that while many things are beyond our control there are a number of areas we can control.

Scientists have developed reliable methods to investigate optimism and its effect on health and productivity.<sup>5</sup> The two methods in widespread use measure Dispositional Optimism and Explanatory Style.

Dispositional Optimism depends on positive expectations for outcomes in the future. They are not confined to one or two aspects of life, but are generalised expectations for a good outcome in several areas. Many researchers use the Life Orientation Test to measure Dispositional Optimism.<sup>6</sup>

4. Modern Research of Social Problems, 'The connection of learned helplessness, will-power development and somatic health of pre-schoolers: the core and ways of problem solving', 2013

5. Journal of Happiness Studies, 'Measuring optimism in organizations: development of a workplace explanatory style questionnaire', 2013

6. See Appendix section to take the test

## ‘...our thoughts are not merely reactions to events; they can change what ensues’

Explanatory Style outlines how someone synthesises good or bad news. The pessimist assumes blame for bad news (“It’s me”), assumes the situation is stable (“It will last forever”), and has a global impact (“It will affect everything I do”). The optimist does not assume blame for negative events. Instead, he or she will tend to give themselves credit for good news, assume good things will last, and be confident that positive developments will spill over into many areas of his life.<sup>6</sup>

It is these actions that dramatically affect the way we lead our lives, how we deal with other people, how we earn our living, and all the aspects of our existence where we normally have some degree of choice. The way we think about this concept can diminish or enlarge the control we have over our own lives – our thoughts are not merely reactions to events; they can change what ensues.<sup>7</sup>

The trick is to act like an optimistic person, even if we aren’t feeling particularly hopeful. If we think that the future can be positive, we would then be more willing to put in time and energy to make that come about. By being engaged and persistent, even if we don’t feel particularly positive, the benefits of optimism – like satisfaction and health – will soon follow.

Research indicated that optimists approach problems differently to pessimists and that they are able to cope successfully with adversity.<sup>7</sup> Having a tendency to view the glass as half-empty is mentally and physically detrimental and inhibits a person’s resilience or ability to bounce back from life’s inevitable stresses.

The good news is that pessimists can learn to be optimists. Forward thinking employers are taking this insight and applying it to the workplace by helping their employees learn a new set of cognitive skills. They are finding that this not only creates happier and healthier employees, it improves productivity and resilience and reduces absenteeism.<sup>7</sup>

### Sounding a note of caution

As always, it is important to be realistic about this phenomenon. Employers need to recognise that optimism isn’t about maintaining a continuous level of cheerfulness. That type of behaviour isn’t feasible since people can’t be happy all of the time. The goal of increasing happiness levels is to improve upon an individual’s resilience not have them exhibit a constant state of joy.



6. See Appendix section to take the test

7. Dr. Martin Seligman, ‘Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life’, January 2006

# Turning positivity into productivity

Research indicates that employee outlook has a direct impact on the growth of an organisation.<sup>7</sup>

A study examined whether positive employee behaviours and attitudes influence business outcomes.<sup>8</sup> It found that employee satisfaction, behaviour and turnover predict the following year's profitability and that these aspects have an even stronger correlation with customer satisfaction.<sup>8</sup>

Gallup Organization reported that highly satisfied groups of employees often exhibited above-average levels of the following characteristics:<sup>8</sup>

- Customer loyalty: 56%
- Productivity: 50%
- Employee retention: 50%
- Safety records: 50%
- Profitability: 33%

Organisations that recognise the physical wellbeing and psychological health of employees are key indicators of organisational success will reap financial benefits. These companies are likely to experience far lower levels of work disruption due to absenteeism and presenteeism when compared to peer organisations in their industry.

Such attitudes further help to develop the prevailing workplace environment that determines employee morale, productivity and team-building abilities. The workplace attitude that prevails serves to validate events as they occur. For example, if there is a prevailing negative attitude, the announcement of a drop-in revenue is met with expectation rather than creating a sense of urgency. The same announcement in a workplace with a positive attitude would be

met with the sense that a business process is not working properly and must be rectified. The prevailing sense of optimism in the face of bad news helps validate the strong feeling of teamwork the company has developed.

The importance of boosting productivity cannot be overstated. If businesses in Britain alone raised productivity by 1% every year, within a decade it would add £240bn to the size of the economy – the equivalent of £9,000 per household.<sup>9</sup>

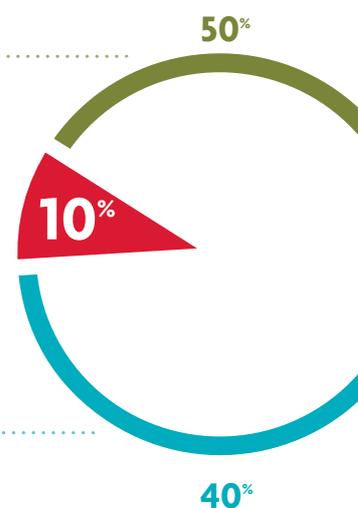
In studies into how much control we have over our own happiness, psychologists have discovered that it is primarily determined by three elements: genetic predisposition, external factors and intentional activities.<sup>10</sup>

The studies found that only 10% of life experience defined by things we have no control over, such as redundancy from work, a car accident or a death in the family.<sup>10</sup> These circumstances of life that just happen. While we have no control over them, it's only 10% of the pie. Even with a 50% genetic baseline, 40% is completely shaped by our behaviours, thoughts, and attitudes – all things we can control.<sup>10</sup>

**Genetic baseline:**  
how predisposed you are to be happy

**External factors:**  
circumstances of life (finances, health, etc)

**Intentional activity:**  
behaviours, thoughts and attitudes



7. Dr. Martin Seligman, 'Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life', January 2006

8. Corporate Leadership Council, 'Key Findings: Linking Employee Satisfaction with Productivity, Performance, and Customer Satisfaction', July 2003

9. United Kingdom's HM treasury, 'Policy paper: Autumn Statement 2016', November 2016

10. Psychological Bulletin, 'The benefits of frequent positive affect: Does happiness lead to success?', 2015

‘...employers should also be mindful of how employee health ultimately affects productivity...’

CASE STUDY

## An effective method to increase productivity

The first question of any employer asked to invest in programmes to improve employee wellbeing is likely to be: what's the return? It is obviously a good thing to do, but businesses will always look to qualify the value of an investment.

### Do “happiness” and feelings of optimism make human beings more productive?

According to an experiment conducted at the University of Warwick, yes, happiness does indeed make people more productive at work. Economists carried out a number of experiments to test the idea that happy employees work harder. In the laboratory, they found feeling happy made people around 12% more productive.<sup>3</sup>

During experiments with more than 700 participants, a number of the participants were either shown a comedy movie clip or treated to free chocolate, drinks and fruit. Others were questioned about recent family tragedies, such as bereavements, to assess whether lower levels of happiness were later associated with lower levels of productivity.

After a leading multinational technology company read this study and consequently invested more in employee support, employee satisfaction rose 37%. Under scientifically controlled conditions, making workers happier really pays off. The driving force seems to be that happier workers use the time they have more effectively, increasing the pace at which they can work without sacrificing quality.

The experiment also had implications for promotion policies. The same experiment showed happier subjects are more productive, the same pattern appears in four different experiments. This research provides some guidance for management in all kinds of organisations, who should strive to make workplaces emotionally healthy for their workforce.

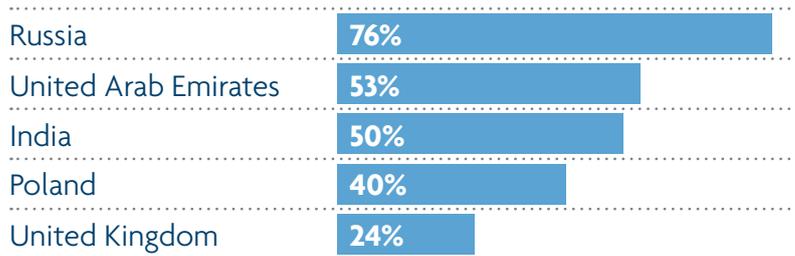
3. Journal of Labor Economics, 'Happiness and Productivity,' October 2015

Break that intentional activity down still further, and it's clear that it is primarily shaped by three factors:

1. **Optimism:** we have control over things that matter
2. **Social connectedness:** positive interactions with others
3. **Perspective:** the perception of stress (challenge or threat).

Our happiness and our perception of success largely depends upon how we see the world and that good news is that this is something we have control over.

Given the links between optimism and physical health, employers should be mindful of how employee health ultimately affects productivity. The results of a study by MetLife and the Institute for Health and Productivity Management showed that with the exception of the United Kingdom, at least 40% of employees surveyed in five countries strongly agreed or agreed they were worried that their health could negatively impact their ability to perform work.<sup>11</sup>



Workplace optimism, within the context of an encouraging a positive work environment, is also known to facilitate stronger relationships. In this environment, a dominant belief is that hard work leads to greater possibilities for the employee, the team and even the organisation and its customers. Employees believe they are valued contributors and that their work matters.

Attitudes do not necessarily create competition in the workplace, but they enhance the competitive environment. A negative attitude in the workplace creates an atmosphere of distrust among employees and causes employees to attempt to achieve success at the expense of each other. In a workplace with a positive attitude, competition is seen as a motivator that inspires employees to perform at their best to improve productivity.

Can optimistic attitudes reduce absenteeism? Yes it does. A large study tracked Finnish citizens and their absences from the work place.<sup>12</sup> The researchers looked at personal identification numbers (a unique number assigned to each Finnish citizen) to link to the electronic records of sickness absence data kept by their employers. For every participant, the number of sick days was calculated for each month during a 55-month follow-up. Researchers found that individuals scoring high on optimism had a smaller increase in recorded sick days after a major life event, a death, or the onset of severe illness in the family, compared with those scoring low on optimism.<sup>12</sup>

Currently, low engagement scores and poor job satisfaction numbers continue to damage productivity across many work cultures. While senior managers are expected to address business issues or opportunities that directly affect balance sheets, workforce problems are put aside as nice-to-do 'someday projects'. Increasing work place optimism at an operational level should be a strategic directive by company leadership and not seen as a nice-to-do project for human resources or any other department.

11. IHPM and MetLife, "Global Workplace Wellness: Healthy Employees, Healthy Business Report", 2016

12. American Psychological Association, 'Optimism and Pessimism as Predictors of Change in Health After Death or Onset of Severe Illness in Family', 2005



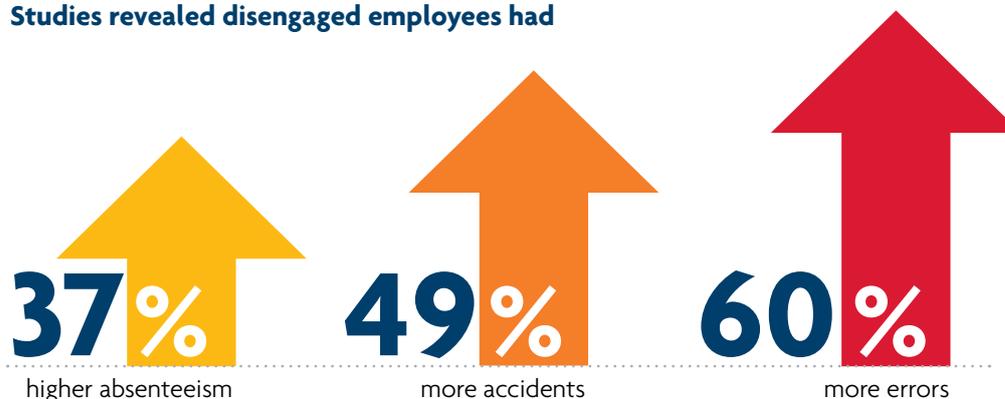
Healthcare expenditure at high-pressure companies is nearly 50% greater than at other organisations.<sup>13</sup> The American Psychological Association estimated more than \$500 billion is siphoned off from the US economy because of work place stress and 550 million workdays were lost each year due to stress on the job.<sup>14</sup> The analysis attributed 60-80% of workplace accidents to stress and it's estimated that more than 80% of doctor visits were due to stress related conditions.<sup>14</sup>

In the workplace, a stressful and pessimistic environment can lead to an increase of almost 50% in voluntary turnover.<sup>14</sup> The Center for American Progress estimates that replacing a single employee costs approximately 20% of that employee's salary<sup>15</sup>. The costs associated with recruiting new talent and training them for a role, combined with lower productivity in the short to medium term are significant. A positive workplace encourages employees to become involved in company success. Employees invite career development so that they may be part of future company projects. A negative attitude leads to turnover and a loss of experienced staff members, which degrades the company's ability to grow.

If managers create a cut-throat environment where fear is used as a lever rather than positive reinforcement and motivation, research suggests that the stress it creates is likely to lead to disengaged employees over the long term. Studies revealed disengaged employees had 37% higher absenteeism, 49% more accidents and 60% more errors in the workplace.<sup>8</sup>

When employees believe managers exhibit poor leadership it can have serious effects, such as increasing absence levels and the risk of illness amongst personnel later in life. The longer someone works for a poor manager the higher his or her risk of suffering a heart attack within 10 years, according to a thesis from Karolinska Institutet.<sup>16</sup>

### Studies revealed disengaged employees had



8. Corporate Leadership Council, 'Key Findings: Linking Employee Satisfaction with Productivity, Performance, and Customer Satisfaction', July 2003  
13. BMC Public Health, 'Psychosocial working conditions and the utilization of health care services', June 2011  
14. American Psychological Association, 'Stress in America: Paying With Our Health', February 2015  
15. Center for American Progress, 'There Are Significant Business Costs to Replacing Employees', November 2012  
16. Karolinska Institutet, 'Poor leadership poses a health risk at work', November 2009

## Powerful predictor of sales success

Optimism is a super-secret, predictive hiring trait, which when used to hire salespeople, is a far better predictor to success in sales than everything we may be using today.

In the mid 80's MetLife was hiring 5,000 sales representatives a year. To ensure their success, MetLife was attributing approximately \$150 million dollars every two years for training and development, approximately \$30K per person.<sup>7</sup> Data indicates, however, that 50% of sales associates quit within the first year and four out of five sales reps left the company by the fourth year. Overall, that's \$300 million invested in training costs just to lose 80% of the workforce every four years.

To address this problem, MetLife started working with Dr. Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, who had been doing research on the impact of optimism and success. His work emphasised that optimism breeds success, not the other way around.

At the time, MetLife screened new applicants with their own, original test in order to be considered for employment. With the help of Dr. Seligman, MetLife added a second test to the application process to assess optimism levels. The results were astounding.

In the first year, those who passed the optimism test and MetLife's sales aptitude test outperformed those who only passed the aptitude test (or pessimists) by 8%.<sup>7</sup> In the second year, the optimists outsold the pessimists by 31%.<sup>7</sup>

The "super-optimists" who scored extremely high on the optimism test but who failed the aptitude test outperformed those who passed MetLife's aptitude test by 21% in the first year and 57% in year two.<sup>7</sup>

The data was indisputable, optimism heavily correlated to predicting a sales person's success, even if they lacked the prerequisite selling aptitude.

7. Dr. Martin Seligman, 'Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life', January 2006

# Our health may be a result of our attitude to life

There is no doubt that what happens in the brain influences what happens in the body. A study following 70,000 individuals over eight years found those who maintained a positive attitude were significantly less likely than their pessimistic counterparts to succumb to cancer, heart disease, respiratory disease, stroke and infection.<sup>17</sup>

An optimistic outlook early in life can also predict better health and a lower rate of death during follow-up periods of 15 to 40 years.<sup>17</sup> While this is partly explained by the fact that optimists are more likely to engage in healthy behaviours, it also shows that a hopeful attitude has a direct, positive impact on our physical systems.

Pessimists might suggest that the impact of positive thinking is more apparent than real. To counter this argument, researchers adjusted their results for pre-existing medical conditions, including physical problems such as heart disease and mental health problems such as depression. They found medical conditions did not appear to lessen the benefits of a bright outlook on life.

Another explanation of how optimism promotes good health is behavioural. It is entirely possible that optimists enjoy better health and longer lives than pessimists because they lead healthier lifestyles, build stronger social support networks and get better medical care. Indeed, some studies report that optimists are more likely to exercise, less likely to smoke and more likely to follow medical advice than pessimists.<sup>17</sup>

As well as encouraging healthy behaviour, optimism may have biological benefits that help improve health. A study found that a positive outlook on life was linked to lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol, even after taking age, employment, income, ethnicity, obesity, smoking, and depression into account.<sup>18</sup>

A study by Harvard University suggests that a sunny disposition is also associated with lower levels of two markers of inflammation (C-reactive protein and interleukin-6), which predict the risk of heart attack and stroke.<sup>17</sup> Other possible benefits include reduced levels of adrenaline, improved immune function, and less active clotting systems.<sup>17</sup>

Those are compelling arguments – but how do employers really use this knowledge and why should they?

In the workplace, these results have significant financial implications because effective absence management, particularly sickness absence management can save organisations millions a year. If a company can motivate their employees to think differently, the employer will see a positive impact on their bottom line. We need employees to understand the link between their own mental health and their physical wellbeing – ‘investing in optimism’ may sound like a catch phrase but it is grounded in serious academic and business insight. The bottom line for business is that happiness pays.

17. Harvard Medical School, ‘Optimism and your health’, May 2008

18. Journal of personality, ‘Positive Affect and Psychobiological Processes Relevant to Health’, December 2009

So what are the health benefits of a positive outlook? Being optimistic in our outlook delivers a range of scientifically proven health benefits:<sup>17</sup>

### Overall health

Researchers have found that optimism had a remarkable impact on physical and mental health. They examined overall longevity, survival from a disease, heart health, immunity, cancer outcomes, pregnancy outcomes, pain tolerance, and other health topics and found that those who had a more optimistic outlook did better and had better results than those who were pessimistic.

The overarching message here is that having a positive attitude can boost our physical health, no matter what might be ailing us. Researchers also noted that optimism seemed to have consistent benefits for people regardless of demographic factors such as income level or overall health status.

A study found that people who were very optimistic had 55% lower risk of death from all causes and a 23% lower risk of heart-related death, compared with people who reported a high level of pessimism.<sup>19</sup>



**55%**

lower risk of death from all causes



**23%**

lower risk of heart-related death

### Cardiovascular disease

Cardiovascular disease (CVDs), particularly coronary artery disease, can have a devastating effect on your workforce — both men and women. As CVDs progresses, it can affect strength and stamina. A heart attack may mean a long recovery and work limitations afterwards. A severe heart attack can kill.

CVDs are the number one cause of death globally — more people die annually from CVDs than from any other cause.<sup>20</sup> An estimated 17.7 million people died from CVDs in 2015, representing 31% of all global deaths.<sup>20</sup> Of these deaths, an estimated 7.4 million were due to coronary heart disease and 6.7 million were due to stroke.<sup>20</sup>

Studies suggest that improved outlook may reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease.<sup>21</sup> Individuals displaying the highest levels of optimism are twice as likely to be in ideal cardiovascular health compared to their more pessimistic counterparts, according to a study conducted at the University of Illinois.<sup>22</sup> While another study shows a sunnier outlook on life was associated with a lower risk of heart disease and mortality. Optimists were 9% less likely to develop heart disease and 14% less likely to die from any cause than their pessimistic counterparts.<sup>23</sup> This research tracked more than 97,000 women older than 50 for eight years.

Conversely, studies have revealed those who measure high on hostility and have a cynical view of the world are two and a half times more likely to have some calcium deposits in the arteries than less hostile and cynical people are.<sup>24</sup> Calcium deposits are an early sign of developing heart disease. The link between hostility and calcification persisted even after they accounted for smoking, blood pressure, and being overweight.<sup>24</sup>

17. Harvard Medical School, 'Optimism and your health', May 2008

19. Giltay, E., 'Archives of General Psychiatry', November 2004

20. World Health Organization, 'Fact Sheet: Cardiovascular Diseases', September 2016

21. John Hopkins Medicine, 'The Power of Positive Thinking'

22. <http://time.com/3663542/optimism-heart-disease/>

23. Circulation: Journal of the American Heart Association, 'Optimism may lower your risk of heart disease', August 2009

24. <http://www.youmeworks.com/pessimism-and-heart-disease.html>

‘...people with more positive views, on average, lived 7.6 years longer than people with more negative views.’

Studies have also been completed to identify the impact of attitude in influencing outcomes. They found that a predominantly pessimistic attitude resulted in twice the incidence of heart disease. In another study, men who had reduced heart function after a heart attack were given psychological tests. The ones who measured high on negative emotions were more than four times more likely to have another heart attack in the next ten years!

Attitudes certainly play a role in predicting future cardiovascular events in those who have already suffered an episode.

● **Stroke and hypertension<sup>24</sup>**

Researchers have identified links between optimism and overall satisfaction with life, with reduced risk of strokes. Conversely, they have identified those who felt negative emotions frequently were 70% more likely to die of a heart attack or stroke. In a study at John Hopkins, researchers found that the most easily-upset men were six times more likely to have a stroke and three times more likely to have a heart attack.

● **Hypertension<sup>24</sup>**

One of the key triggers of coronary artery disease is high blood pressure or hypertension, which can be easily measured at any doctor's visit and is often one of the basic components on a gym's health check. Scientists investigated whether being an optimistic reduced the risk of hypertension, helping protect those with a positive outlook against developing coronary artery disease and found that highly pessimistic participants were three times more likely to exhibit symptoms of hypertension than those classed as optimistic, even after considering other influences.

Another study revealed the impact of a positive outlook even when anti-hypertensive medications were not taken and this study, suprisingly, found that a positive outlook was associated with lower blood pressure. After adjusting for relevant risk factors, they found that positive effect continued to be significantly associated with lower blood pressure.

### Cancers

The link between optimism and the quality of life of someone undergoing treatment for cancer has been investigated extensively.<sup>25</sup> Optimistic people, researchers have identified, experience less stress when faced with potentially life-threatening cancer diagnoses. One study identified a superior “fighting spirit” found in optimists that predicted substantially better quality of life one year after breast cancer surgery.<sup>26</sup> Optimism also predicted less disruption of normal life, distress, and fatigue in one study of women who were undergoing painful treatment for breast cancer.<sup>27</sup> An optimistic character appeared to protect against an urge to withdraw from activities with friends, which indicates socialisation may be important for healing.

Scientists have also evaluated the role of cognitive therapy and relaxation in the fight against cancer. One study highlighted patients who embarked on an eight week course in relaxation and in cognitive therapy.<sup>27</sup> Patients who took the course had more active natural killer cells, which protect the body against tumour growth, than patients who received only standard medical care.<sup>27</sup>

24. <http://www.youmeworks.com/pessimism-and-heart-disease.html>

25. Psychosomatic medicine, 'Hypertension in Older Adults and the Role of Positive Emotions', September 2006

26. <http://www.sevenwealth.org/swer-library/positive-psychology-and-the-science-of-happiness>

27. Davies Guttman, 'The Power Of Positivity: Reaching your potential by changing your outlook', June 2014D

28. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 'Psychoneuroimmunology: Psychological influences on immune function and health', June 2002

29. Psychological Science, 'Psychological Language on Twitter Predicts County-Level Heart Disease Mortality', January 2015

## Social media platform an indicator of psychological wellbeing and predictor of Heart Disease

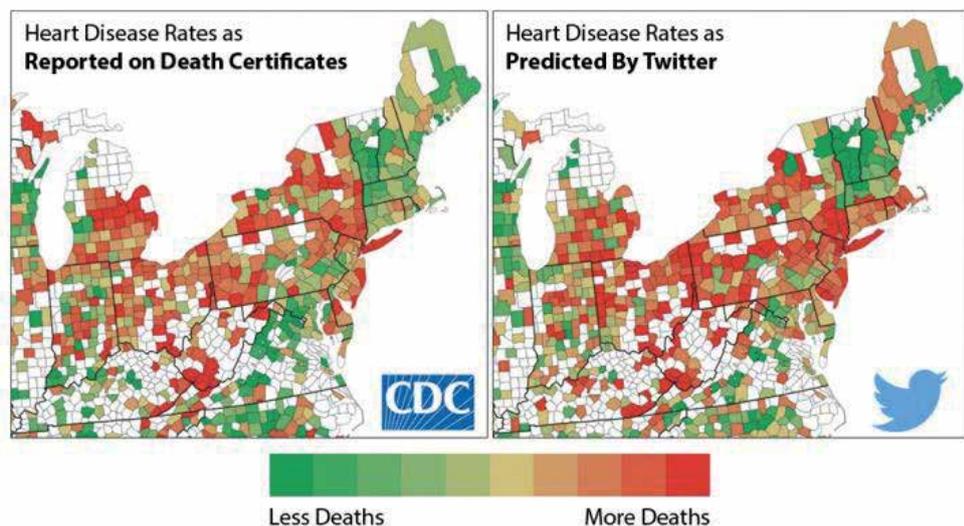
Researchers from the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) demonstrated a unique use for social media. They found Twitter acts as a barometer of a community's psychological wellbeing and could even be used to predict rates of heart disease.<sup>29</sup>

UPenn researchers demonstrated a psychological and emotional link with heart disease risk. They highlighted that negative emotions such as anger, stress and fatigue expressed in tweets were associated with a higher heart disease risk for the Tweeter. Positive emotions like excitement and optimism were associated with lower risk. That smiley face emoji can be an indicator of someone's physical health. With billions of users posting constantly about their emotions and state of mind, the world of social media represents a new frontier for research.

Researchers analysed public tweets to establish emotional dictionaries and generate clusters of words that reflected

behaviours and attitudes. There were enough tweets and health data from about 1,300 counties, which contain 88 percent of the country's population to develop substantive insights.

The outcome is compelling. They established users that used negative emotional language and expletives, strongly correlated with heart disease mortality, even after variables like income and education were considered. Positive emotional language showed the opposite correlation, indicating that optimism attitudes born out using words such as 'wonderful' may be protective against heart disease.



29. Psychological Science, 'Psychological Language on Twitter Predicts County-Level Heart Disease Mortality', January 2015

Researchers have studied pathways that show how negative emotions enhance the production of pre-inflammatory cytokines (small proteins that are important in cell signalling – the coordination of cell actions) and the inflammation, in turn, has been linked to certain cancers, Alzheimer's disease, arthritis, fragility, osteoporosis.<sup>28</sup>

### Diabetes

Studies on patients with Type 2 diabetes have showed that positive feelings were associated with better control of blood sugar, an increase in physical activity and healthy eating, less use of tobacco and a lower risk of dying.<sup>24</sup>

### Depression

Depression has a very strong relation to the deadly triad of pessimism, cynicism and defeatism. The way we think can either turn a setback into a passing annoyance with relatively little impact or into something with much more serious consequences. A study revealed depressed men were 70% more likely to develop heart disease than men who were not depressed.<sup>24</sup> Women with the same level of depression were only 12% more likely to develop heart disease.<sup>24</sup> However, when the researchers looked at severely depressed women, they were 78% more likely to develop heart disease than women who weren't depressed at all.<sup>24</sup> The findings were true even when they factored in other risk factors like weight, blood pressure, smoking, and age.

In another study of people who had already had one heart attack, researchers found that depressed people were three times more likely to have a second heart attack within a year of their first one than those who weren't depressed. Temporary depression is common after a heart attack, but about a third of the people stay depressed. Plenty of research has shown that what makes people remain depressed is their level of pessimism, cynicism and defeatism or, you could say, their habitual way of thinking.

### Immune system

Working together, psychologists and immunologists are producing evidence that altering a patient's mental state can boost their immune system. The resulting discipline called psychoneuroimmunology seeks to discover the mechanisms that link a person's emotional life with difficulties of the immune system, the body's line of defence against bacteria, virus and cancer. Angry individuals have a weaker immune response to a vaccine, whereas those high in optimism had a stronger response.<sup>30</sup>

- **Cold and flu**

A study exposed people who had been rated on their level of optimism to influenza and human rhinovirus, the cause of the common cold. The subjects who were more positive were less likely to develop a disease in the first place and when they did get sick they were more likely to rate their symptoms as manageable. This study showed that tendency to express positive emotions was associated with greater resistance to developing a cold.<sup>31</sup>

### Disability

Optimism is an important predictor of adaptive coping, successful goal attainment, and overall wellbeing for people with disabilities and their caregivers.<sup>32</sup> The relationship between optimism and the ability to work is an important goal for many people with disabilities. Consider people who have cystic fibrosis, a genetic disease characterised by chronic breathing difficulties and frequent chest infections. Because of these symptoms, individuals with cystic fibrosis often have difficulty completing simple, daily tasks, much less maintaining steady employment. In a cross-sectional study of people with cystic fibrosis, half of whom were employed and half of whom were not, greater optimism was associated with a greater number of hours worked.

In a study of patients with Parkinson's disease, researchers determined that optimistic patients had a better quality of life than other patients did.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the severity of Parkinson's disease was lower in optimistic patients than in other patients.<sup>24</sup> When we cope with a disability in a positive way, we are training ourselves emotionally and physically to become better.

Optimism appears to confer benefits to caregivers of people with disabilities. This is particularly important since caregivers are at a greater risk for symptoms of distress and depression and other health problems compared to non-care givers.

### Healthier babies<sup>33</sup>

A study analysed the state of the psyche of pregnant women in their last trimester and studied the state of their new borns for a year. During the experiment, about 20% of the women experienced depression and about 30% felt anxiety.<sup>33</sup> As a result, out of 583 babies born in time, one in every five baby weighed less than two and a half kilograms.<sup>33</sup>

This led doctors to conclude that children's health depends on the psychological state of their mothers. Experts said that depression and anxiety disorders in pregnant women can be a major factor in mortality and ill health in infants.<sup>33</sup>

### Stress

Workplace stress is inevitable, but research shows that how we cope with that stress – our resilience – is determined by our psychological orientation.<sup>14</sup>

Stress has been linked to a wealth of health issues, including an increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease and even death.<sup>14</sup> Those that struggle with stress are also likely to be disengaged employees, which has a direct impact on their performance and their risk level in the workplace.<sup>14</sup> Studies identified that disengaged workers had 49% more accidents in the workplace and made 60% more errors than their non-stressed peers.<sup>14</sup>

### Longevity

Our personality, attitude toward aging and other psychosocial variables might help either grant us extra years or shorten our life. Personality and attitude may also influence our physical and mental abilities as we age. A study found that people with more positive views, on average, lived 7.6 years longer than people with more negative views.<sup>34</sup> This significant survival advantage remained after controlling for other relevant factors.

14. American Psychological Association, 'Stress in America: Paying With Our Health', February 2015
24. <http://www.youmeworks.com/pessimism-and-heart-disease.html>
28. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 'Psychoneuroimmunology: Psychological influences on immune function and health', June 2002
30. University of Illinois, 'Happy People Live Longer: Subjective Well-Being Contributes to Health and Longevity', October 2010
31. Psychosomatic Medicine, 'Positive Emotional Style Predicts Resistance to Illness After Experimental Exposure to Rhinovirus or Influenza A Virus', October 2006
32. Michael Wehmeyer, 'The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Disability', August 2013
33. Health Psychology, 'The impact of prenatal maternal stress and optimistic disposition on birth outcomes in medically high-risk women', November 2000
34. American Psychological Association, 'A healthy mind, a longer life', November 2006



# How to build optimism and increase workplace wellbeing

Studies of wellbeing in the workplace have found that to foster a culture of productivity, collaboration and creativity, organisations need to consider much more than just the physical health of their employees.<sup>35</sup>

Rather they need to take a holistic approach to wellbeing, understanding the emotional and cognitive as well as physical needs of employees.

MetLife's Employee Benefit Trend Studies have shown that health and wellness programmes improve employee perceptions of an employer and help to drive better job satisfaction and loyalty. Employees who participated in a wellness programme in the United Kingdom were 38% satisfied with their job, 27% were likely to say their company was a great place to work, and 23% were loyal to their employer.<sup>35</sup>

Psychological resilience, an individual's ability to successfully adapt to life tasks in the face of social disadvantage or highly adverse conditions, can be learned. Resilience in the workplace is the ability to bounce back from a negative experience while still successfully completing a job.

A common misconception is that resilient people are free from negative thoughts and are happy in the majority of situations. In reality, it is the resilient individuals have developed coping techniques that allow them to effectively and easily navigate through crises. People who demonstrate resilience are people with optimistic attitudes and can balance out the negative with positive emotions.

So, how can organisations create environments that support positive emotions and help build productive, collaborative and creative employees?

35. MetLife UK Employee Benefit Trend Study, February 2017

# ‘Positive expectations fuel motivation and hard work...’

## Seven steps to teach optimism

There are seven simple, low- or no-cost practices that are easy to incorporate into your workplace and your life.

- 1 Express gratitude**

By encouraging your employees to consciously think about what or who they are grateful for, they can train their brain to focus on positive things. Every day for one week, ask them to write down three good or positive things from the day. Put out a “Gratitude Box” for employees to express thanks for something a colleague or leader has done.
- 2 Foster social connections**

Professionally, good relationships with colleagues and working to achieve common objectives build a feeling of purpose which in turn boosts happiness. Plan a social gathering outside of work or host an activity for families. Share with employees and attendees information about the benefits of strong connections for boosting happiness.
- 3 Do good to feel good**

Studies show that doing acts of kindness and generosity improves mood. Partner with your Corporate Social Responsibility team to create or promote volunteering activities for your colleagues. Be sure to communicate about the link between service and emotional health.
- 4 Promote physical activity**

Physical activity releases feel-good hormones that boost mood. Promote at least 10 minutes of physical activity at a time, several times a day. Encourage everyday fitness boosters like the use of stairs, biking to work, parking at the back of the parking lot to get additional steps, etc. Organise a group fitness class with a fitness instructor or share stretch-at-your-desk resources.
- 5 Create learning opportunities**

The curious and engaged mind is a happy mind. Learning something new can also boost self-confidence and feelings of accomplishment. Partner with Human Resources to have a “Learning Fair” – display information about learning opportunities within your organisation (e.g., online trainings, workshops, self-study materials, etc.). Enrich your employees work life by helping them deepen their understanding of the business and their skills and strengths.
- 6 Change your mindset**

The practice of being mindful lowers stress levels and strengthens our ability to cope with challenges. Host a series of classes on meditation, mindfulness or yoga.
- 7 Encourage laughter and smiles**

Renowned psychologist William James once said, “We do not laugh because we are happy, we are happy because we laugh”. Bring in a Laughter Yoga instructor for a workshop or series. Organise a “What makes you smile?” photo-sharing event where employees can submit photos of things that make them smile. Coordinate an art contest for employees’ children and ask their kids to submit artwork showing what makes them smile. Display all of the entries at a Happiness Art Show.

‘To maximise the opportunities for success it is important to invite employees to actively become part of the process to deliver a solution’

## Four steps to learn optimism

The great news is that optimism can be learned. The following strategies can be used by employees to increase their optimism levels and improve resilience in the workplace. By sharing these tips with employees, you can help them start to think differently about how they think and behave.

1

### **Reframe problems**

Reappraisal is the way to stop setbacks from turning into prolonged problems. Increasing positive thinking doesn't happen on its own. Employees need to consciously deflect the negative and focus on proactively doing positive things, whether that involves hobbies and exercise or simply interacting with others. As an employer, it is about encouragement and facilitation – allow people to share stories of their hobbies on employee intranets, investigate subsidised gym membership or promote companywide participation in charity sporting events.

2

### **Recognise and replace negative self-talk**

Positive self-talk in the workplace means identifying and replacing negative scripts such as “I can't...” or “That is never going to work” with phrases such as “I'll try...” or “Let's see how that will work out”. By merely encouraging employees to act more optimistically, they will become more engaged in the process and outcome. They will be less and less likely to give up after an initial failure. Managers need to be able to identify common forms of negative self-talk, which include: filtering out positive aspects of a situation and only dwelling on the negative; personalising and only blaming oneself; catastrophising and always thinking the worst; and polarising, only seeing things as either good or bad.

3

### **Set and pursue goals**

The way to avoid being immobilised by pessimistic thinking is to act even if we think it might be futile. Have employers create and write down a step-by-step plan for accomplishing goals and then support them in taking the first step.

4

### **Be persistent**

Optimists believe they will eventually succeed, so they keep plugging away at their goals. Management in an organisation can set positive expectations to fuel motivation and hard work, negative expectations have the exact opposite effect.

# Conclusion

Organisations can take proactive steps to help employees improve their health, wellbeing and even life expectancy, while also benefitting from increased productivity and reduced sickness absence. Optimism benefits the individual and the business – it is a win win scenario.

In every workplace one of the biggest challenges is disrupting learned and engrained behaviours. Pessimistic attitudes are sadly contagious in the workplace and some people will be less open to change than others. Simple strategies to break the negativity cycle include actions such as changing seating arrangements to prevent echo chambers of negative reinforcement and encouraging positive employees to socialise with those with a less optimistic attitude.

Companies can't afford to ignore the issue of workplace optimism and a simple first step is to be clear on why there is a need to shift the culture to be more optimistic. There is a need to awaken employees lulled to sleep by the monotonous rhythms of fire drills and lack of

inspired opportunities. Employees may have turned off reasons to care. They are likely to be sceptical and apathetic. It is important to be prepared for this.

Second, identify how to measure progress when moving to a culture of workplace optimism, which behavioural indicators to shift and target key business outcomes, such as a decrease in sick days used, increased productivity, improved quality work.

Finally, engage employee representatives and managers. To maximise the opportunities for success it is important to invite the employees to actively become part of the process to deliver a solution. Simply by engaging employees emphasising they can have a positive impact on the organisation can have a huge impact on their attitude. Alexander Kjerfulf, an international author and speaker has highlighted why it is important managers improve workplace relationships:

“Employees who have positive workplace relationships are happier at work (in fact, good workplace relationships are one of the most important sources of workplace happiness) and we know that people who are happy at work are more productive, more creative and more successful overall.”<sup>36</sup>

36. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jacquelynsmith/2013/09/24/how-much-coworker-socializing-is-good-for-your-career/#1641bd8051a0>

# Appendix – Identifying our thinking

Does your frame of mind more accurately fit with the description in Box A “Optimist” or Box B “Pessimist”? Don’t worry if it’s Box B – the great news is you can train yourself and others to be more optimistic.

## Characteristics of positive thinking

Positive thinking doesn’t mean that you keep your head in the sand and ignore life’s less pleasant situations. It just means that we approach unpleasantness in a more positive and productive way. We think the best is going to happen, not the worst.

Positive thinking often starts with self-talk. Self-talk is the endless stream of unspoken thoughts that run through our head. These automatic thoughts can be positive or negative. Some of our self-talk comes from logic and reason. Other self-talk may arise from misconceptions that you create because of lack of information.

If the thoughts that run through your head are mostly negative, your outlook on life is more likely to be pessimistic. If your thoughts are mostly positive, you’re most likely an optimist — someone who practices positive thinking.

# A

### Does your mind-set or that of your team align with the following positions?

- It’s an opportunity to learn something new
- I’ll tackle it from a different angle
- Necessity is the mother of invention
- I wasn’t able to fit it into my schedule, but I can re-examine some priorities
- I can try to make it work
- Let’s take a chance
- I’ll see if I can open the channels of communication
- I’ll give it another try.

## Characteristics of negative thinking

You can learn to turn negative thinking into positive thinking. The process is simple, but it does take time and practice — you’re creating a new habit, after all. Here are some ways to think and behave in a more positive and optimistic way:

**Filtering:** you magnify the negative aspects of a situation and filter out all of the positive ones. For example, you had a great day at work. You completed your tasks ahead of time and were complimented for doing a speedy and thorough job. That evening, you focus only on your plan to do even more tasks and forget about the compliments you received.

**Personalising:** when something bad occurs, you automatically blame yourself. For example, you hear that an evening out with friends is cancelled and you assume that the change in plans is because no one wanted to be around you.

**Catastrophising:** you automatically anticipate the worst. The coffee shop gets your order wrong and you automatically think that the rest of your day will be a disaster.

**Polarising:** you see things only as either good or bad. There is no middle ground. You feel that you have to be perfect or you’re a total failure.

# B

### Does your mindset or that of your team align with the following positions:

- Negative self-talk
- I’ve never done it before
- It’s too complicated
- I don’t have the resources
- I’m too lazy to get this done
- There’s no way it will work
- It’s too radical a change
- No one bothers to communicate with me
- I’m not going to get any better at this.

# Appendix – Life orientation test<sup>37</sup>

The Life Orientation Test (LOT) was developed to assess individual differences in generalised optimism versus pessimism. This measure, and its successor the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R), have been used in a good deal of research on the behavioral, affective, and health consequences of this personality variable.

The LOT-R is a very brief measure that is easy to use and ideal for use in projects in which many measures are being used. Please note that this is a research instrument, not intended for clinical applications. There are no “cut-offs” for optimism or pessimism; we use it as a continuous dimension of variability.

Please answer the following questions about yourself by indicating the extent of your agreement using the following scale:

strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
0	1	2	3	4

Be as honest as you can throughout, and try not to let your responses to one question influence your response to other questions. There are no right or wrong answers.

	Score
1. In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.	0 1 2 3 4
2. It's easy for me to relax.	0 1 2 3 4
3. If something can go wrong for me, it will.	0 1 2 3 4
4. I'm always optimistic about my future.	0 1 2 3 4
5. I enjoy my friends a lot.	0 1 2 3 4
6. It's important for me to keep busy.	0 1 2 3 4
7. I hardly ever expect things to go my way.	0 1 2 3 4
8. I don't get upset too easily.	0 1 2 3 4
9. I rarely count on good things happening to me.	0 1 2 3 4
10. Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad.	0 1 2 3 4
<b>Overall score</b>	

### Scoring:

- Reverse code for questions 3,7 and 9 prior to scoring

4	= strongly disagree
3	= disagree
2	= neutral
1	= agree
0	= strongly agree

- Sum questions 1, 3, 4, 7, 9 and 10 to obtain an overall score. Questions 2, 5, 6 and 8 are filler items only and aren't scored as part of the revised scale. The revised scale was constructed in order to eliminate two items from the original scale, which dealt more with coping style than with positive expectations for future outcomes. The correlation between the revised scale and the original scale is 0.95.

37. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, "Distinguishing optimism from neuroticism (and trait anxiety, self-mastery, and self-esteem) - A reevaluation of the life orientation test", 1994



● [maxis-gbn.com](https://maxis-gbn.com)

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