

# Optimism: Is It A Personality Trait, Or Could People Possibly Learn It?

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Research shows that optimism is correlated with various good outcomes: higher life expectancy, better recovery rates, success at work. But is optimism a personality trait, or could it be learned?

ARI SHAPIRO, HOST:

There's a lot of research showing that optimism is correlated with all kinds of good outcomes like increased life expectancy, better recovery rates from heart operations, even success in work. But optimism, particularly right now, can be hard to come by. So NPR's Alix Spiegel decided to ask, can we choose it?

ALIX SPIEGEL, BYLINE: There's so much packed into the simple word optimist, a whole galaxy of complicated meanings and judgments. To say, I'm an optimist, is to say that you're someone committed to hope and progress, the sunny side of a complicated world, which brings me to Jake Fratangelo and the Optimist Creed.

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JAKE FRATANGELO: To be strong so that nothing can disturb your peace of mind, to be just as enthusiastic about the success of others as you are about your own, to be too large for worry, too noble for anger, too strong for fear, and too happy to permit the presence of trouble.

SPIEGEL: For close to 100 years, this creed has been repeated by countless members of a group called Optimist International. It got started after the First World War, when people really needed some optimism, and now has more than half a million members in 20 countries. Fratangelo is an officer in the D.C. chapter. The group raises money for schools and homeless shelters. Like so many people, Fratangelo's been sheltering at home with his family. But even for him, quite literally an avowed optimist, there have been moments when it's been hard to live the Optimist Creed.

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SPIEGEL: This is Martin Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania. Seligman came to research on optimism through a strange back door. In the '70s, he did a series of experiments on dogs, which demonstrated what he called learned helplessness. Essentially, Seligman put dogs in a situation where they got an uncomfortable electric shock they could do nothing about and found that the dogs became so conditioned that even when they were put into a new situation where there was a clear and unambiguous opportunity to escape, they still didn't do anything. They sat there passive.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

SELIGMAN: They expected that there was nothing they could do, so they didn't try.

SPIEGEL: The dogs had learned to be helpless. Seligman replicated these findings with all kinds of animals.

SELIGMAN: Mice, rats, pigeons.

SPIEGEL: But when it came to people, though his findings were largely similar, there was a real difference.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

SELIGMAN: One-third of people I could not make helpless in laboratory, so I began to wonder, what was it about some people that makes them so resilient?

SPIEGEL: To understand why some people could not be made helpless, Seligman started to look at the reasons people gave when they asked themselves the question, why is this bad thing happening? See; when people try to understand why they're experiencing something painful, they often make a series of unconscious assumptions that can be thought of as a person's explanatory style. Seligman talks about three. The first has to do with whether you think of the bad thing that's happening to you as permanent or temporary.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

SELIGMAN: If you fail an examination, for example, and you think the cause is, I'm stupid, well, stupidity is permanent. It's not very changeable – whereas if you thought I had a hangover, that's changeable.

SPIEGEL: The second has to do with control, whether you think you have the ability to control the outcome or not. And the third, whether you think of the painful thing in front of you as pervasive – that is something that always seems to happen to you – or if it's just this once.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

SELIGMAN: You're rejected by someone you love and you might think, I'm unlovable. On the other hand, you might think, this is just not the right man for me.

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