

## How to Cultivate Optimism

As a new decade begins, I have been considering one of the most important skills that I feel is essential for good mental health: an optimistic attitude. Most of the time, it is not what happens to us that most affects how we feel, it is how we *choose* to handle it. Therefore, regularly developing the skill of identifying the positive aspects of any situation can be useful. Furthermore, training your brain to become more optimistic affords numerous health benefits. Optimists have less cortisol (stress hormone) and more serotonin (mood-boosting neurotransmitter) flowing through their systems. They are also more creative, faster at solving problems, and have increased mental alertness in comparison to pessimists. Optimists not only tend to live healthier lives, they also tend to live longer and happier ones.

People often focus on the one negative aspect of their lives. For example, someone might dislike his/her job a great deal and fixate on it. However, there might be many other blessings or gifts in one's life too. Keep in mind that there is almost always something positive that deserves your attention in your life. Take back your power, and decide how you want to view your life. No one else can do this work for you, as your mental outlook is completely up to you regardless of your circumstances. Find what is positive in your life, and do your best to *focus* on it.

Be mindful of not getting caught up in the past. If an event is over and done with, it can no longer be changed. Instead, focus on the present which is the only entry point for change, and identify what you can do *now*, to either make amends for what happened or behave differently in the future. Practice self-compassion, and forgive yourself for past mistakes. Ruminating about the past is like rocket fuel for anxiety: it only generates more and ensures you stay stuck in it. Let go of the past, and remember that everyone is in a constant state of growth, including you.

Practicing gratitude on a daily basis can help you to focus on the present and cultivate a more optimistic outlook. Being thankful for all that you have right now helps to generate more goodness in your life. Use positive affirmations to help you acknowledge even the smallest gifts in your life, and what helps you to feel good. This attitude often links us to the positive people in our lives. Be aware of who is positive around you, and who brings you down. Spend time with the individuals who lift you up, who make you laugh, and who help you to see the best aspects of life. Acts of kindness can also generate more positive feelings between people, as well as boost our dopamine level (feel-good neurotransmitter).

Even the words you use can help you to develop a more optimistic mindset since what we focus on, we expand. Since words often define the world we see, if we use more positive words we are more likely to see a positive perspective. If we make a conscious effort to focus on what is good in most situations, then that is what our brains will begin to notice more often. This is a habit that is developed over time, one thought at a time. Just making the decision to complain less often, and compliment others (and yourself) more often can help you to see the positive

aspects of those in your life.

Deciding to exercise on a daily basis for at least 20 minutes of intensity can also help you to become more optimistic. This is because exercise increases your endorphins, serotonin, and other pleasurable brain chemicals while reducing stress. Many people find that their whole perspective changes after an intense physical workout. You can also choose to pair some affirmations with exercise, which can help to strengthen these positive thoughts.

Of course, life is always changing and difficulties are inevitable. But, if you have steadily cultivated an optimistic attitude, then you will be more resilient and better able to handle these challenges. Give yourself the best gift you could ever have: the ability to handle whatever comes your way with intelligence, creativity, and good mental health. Since optimism is really about seeing yourself, others and the world with more hope and love, developing an optimistic outlook can truly be transformative during even the most difficult times.