

Five Minutes to Thrive: 29 Apr-03 May 19

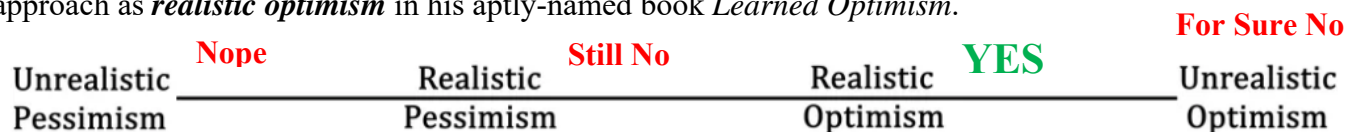
Realistic Optimism

(Probably) one of the most infuriating things you can say to someone is “well, look on the bright side.” You might mean well, but what this statement essentially communicates is:

- What they’re going through is *not that bad*. Things could always be *worse*.
- They’re focusing too much on the *negative*, so they need to try focusing on the *positive*, instead.
- *I don’t know* what to say to you, but I feel like this is a somewhat helpful piece of advice.

So why do we (and other people) persist in using this aphorism, despite our shared disdain of it? I propose it’s because we inherently recognize the psychological utility of optimism, so we’re (albeit woefully) attempting to aid others—and sometimes ourselves—in redirecting our mental energy into a more fruitful orientation. And there’s some scientific merit to this: optimists, at least compared to pessimists, tend to be more proactive in their health behaviors, have a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, are less prone to general illness, report more robust and rewarding social networks, sleep better, and are more satisfied with their lives. Coincidentally, there’s also evidence that pessimists are more logical and realistic in their assessments of life circumstances...which appears to be related to a higher incidence of clinical depression with these folks. Because, well, life can be depressing at times.

Thus, it can seem like we’re faced with two dichotomous extremes: (a) see the world for what it is, and be depressed about it, or (b) embrace “ignorance is bliss,” and annoy, just, *everyone* around you. Thankfully, pessimism and optimism exist along a relatively unfixed and transient continuum, meaning we can be varying degrees of these at different points in our lives. But for the most part, the “ideal” mental orientation exists somewhere just right of the midline. Dr. Martin Seligman refers to this balanced approach as *realistic optimism* in his aptly-named book *Learned Optimism*.



So fortunately, regardless of where you find yourself along this spectrum, there are plenty of ways we can cultivate and begin to practice realistic optimism. For example, you could:

- **Embrace your challenges (instead of ignoring them).** Combine a positive attitude with an honest evaluation of the challenges you may meet along your path. You can start by contrasting your *ideal* outcome with the most *realistic* one, and then imagine what you can do to overcome the challenges.
- **Acknowledge (but don’t obsess over) negative thoughts.** These can be helpful, but only if they motivate you to make a positive change; otherwise, they’ll just bring you down. Find a healthy distraction, use humor as a coping tool, or surround yourself with optimistic others to break the cycle.
- **Take better care of yourself.** The better you feel physically, the better you’ll feel mentally and emotionally. It’s when life gets difficult that the urgency to eat, sleep, and exercise well are so vital.
- **Practice gratitude.** In addition to reframing your difficulties as *challenges* (or *opportunities*), shift your mindset to focus more on the things going well in your life. Perspective influences attitude.

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