

wellness lab

Bright mood, better health

An upbeat outlook can enhance your physical and mental well-being and even help you stay younger longer, research shows. Discover the proven ways to turn up the positivity. *by Tula Karras*

Looking at life with a brighter viewpoint is a science-backed tool that can improve your mood, help you meet goals, and upgrade your health. And you don't have to overhaul your personality to benefit: Even small differences in your attitude can deliver big payoffs, says Hilary Tindle, M.D., the author of *Up: How a Positive Outlook Can Transform Our Health and Aging*.

What makes optimism so powerful is that it's based in realism—it's not about simply thinking things will be OK. "True optimists are pragmatic, perhaps because they scan the horizon to see what might go wrong, then work and plan around those potential pitfalls so things can go right," Dr. Tindle says. In other words, optimists proactively work to make the positive happen. In return, they score some major health benefits, including:

A LONGER LIFE. Optimists are more likely than pessimists to have a lower risk of chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease. That's because, in part, optimists tend to follow a healthy lifestyle. The reason: If you expect good things for yourself, then you're more apt to do things to keep moving in that direction, experts say.

LESS STRESS. Optimists are better at coping with tension, which also means they can short-circuit rising levels of the stress hormone cortisol. We all experience spikes in cortisol. But optimists are likely to tackle a problem head-on, which increases their chances of solving it.

LOWER RISK OF DEPRESSION. Positive thinking patterns can serve as a sort of "psychological immunization" to combat depression in the same way that vaccines inoculate us against viruses. This may be because optimists tend to have larger social networks and more supportive relationships, which serve as a safety net in hard times, says Carsten Wrosch, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Concordia University in Montreal.

AN EDGE AGAINST AGING. Pessimists tend to have shorter telomeres—repeat sequences of DNA that form protective caps on the ends of our chromosomes—than nonpessimists, according to research from the University of California, San Francisco. This means the telomeres are aging faster. "Cells with shorter telomeres circulate and release large amounts of inflammatory proteins that contribute to inflammation, which is a mechanism of aging," says Aoife O'Donovan, Ph.D., a professor at UCSF and a research psychologist.

SIX SIMPLE WAYS TO BECOME MORE OPTIMISTIC

The good news: Even if it doesn't come naturally to you, there are proven ways to tweak your outlook, says Dr. Tindle, who labels herself as a "struggling optimist." About 25 to 30 percent of optimism is genetic, but much of the remainder has to do with thinking patterns you can control. Use any or all of these strategies to start an upward spiral of good thoughts.

1

PICK UP A PEN

Research shows that when people write down their vision of their best self, with as many sensory details as possible, and then visualize this self for five minutes daily for a week or two, they become more optimistic, Wrosch says.

2

STOP DISTORTING THINGS

Often a pessimistic viewpoint forms when we engage in all-or-nothing thinking or believe that our in-the-moment feelings—despair, anger, hurt—are permanent, Dr. Tindle says. In these instances, step back and think of yourself as a third party, then reappraise. That will help you see the situation more accurately.

3

SPEND TIME WITH POSITIVE PEOPLE

Good relationships are the one factor most correlated to health and happiness, according to the Harvard Study of Adult Development. Socializing lowers cortisol and activates dopamine, the happy hormone. When you surround yourself with optimists, you increase the chances you'll become one too, since behaviors and mindsets are contagious.

4

GIVE YOURSELF A REALITY CHECK

Humans are wired to imagine things going wrong "so we can respond to what's happening in real time and prepare for what might happen in the future," O'Donovan says. But some of us worry a lot about things that will never happen. To stop the doomsday thinking, she suggests writing down what you're worried about, then going back a week or a month later to see what negative things came to pass. "It's a reality check for our expectations of the future," she says. That can help us dial down the worry over time.

5

DON'T SUPPRESS NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

It's important not to confuse optimism with burying anger or sadness or fear, since that can easily backfire. "Suppression of emotions is associated with disease-causing inflammation," O'Donovan says. Instead, accept the feelings without judgment, identify the reason for them, and work through them.

6

PRIORITIZE SLEEP AND EXERCISE

When we're sleep deprived, we don't regulate our emotions as well, and negative thinking can take over, Dr. Tindle says. Exercise releases feel-good chemicals, which may help explain how it can brighten our viewpoint. Plus, "research shows it can clear the cobwebs of stress and sadness and blunt the effects of clinical depression and anxiety," she says. It's linked to longer telomeres, so it can help protect you from aging too. ■

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