

# Practicing Optimism

Ideas from Dr. Jonah Paquette's, "Real Happiness: Proven Paths for Contentment, Peace & Well-Being".

## Optimism Exercise #1

### Slow and Steady Wins the Race

Pessimism can result from thinking that we can't possibly accomplish goals or achievements from where we are in life. We look at the magnitude of the project, how far ahead the finish line is, and we think it's impossible. We must remember that the path to reaching any goal is like being on a long journey. We can't achieve it overnight.

This exercise is about looking at our goals and breaking them down into manageable steps. We can help our mind develop greater optimism by breaking a large goal down into many smaller steps, and only focusing on the step we are on and maybe the next step. We'll find that each small step is achievable.

Think about the goals or dreams you have for the future. Some of the goals may feel so big that they feel both exciting and overwhelming. Pessimism can cause us to think that our goals are not achievable because we can't accomplish them right now. To overcome this way of thinking, break down your goals and dreams into bite-size steps. Think about these questions as you consider the goal you want to break down:

- Write down your long-term goal.
- Pick a flexible date by which to accomplish it.
- Write down the first step that is necessary to achieve this goal.
- Consider whose help you might need to accomplish this goal.
- Think about what you need to do within the next month to keep your goal moving forward. What steps can you take?
- How about during the next 3-6 months? What additional steps need to be taken?
- It can help to write down as many general steps as come to mind, without being so detailed that we bog ourselves down.
- Now take each step one at a time and enjoy the present moment. Experience and appreciate each step along the way to achieving your goal.

## Optimism Exercise #2

### Overcoming Pessimism

This exercise involves identifying negative, pessimistic self-talk that gets in your way and replacing it with realistic, optimistic ways of thinking. We become what we think about, so how we think about things matters! **We can change the way we feel by changing the way we think.** The goal is to aim for realism and truth. Our interpretations of what happens in our lives is crucial for our levels of happiness and contentment.

For the next week, notice and write down your negative or pessimistic thoughts. See if you can identify the types of thoughts that are most troublesome for you. When you find yourself feeling bad at any given moment, take the time to notice your thoughts. Write down a few of these thoughts.

With the thoughts written down, it's time to challenge them. Can you reinterpret the situation in a more realistic manner? When you do this, over time, you can begin to replace the negative thoughts with a more balanced perspective. Here are some questions to help you challenge your negative thoughts:

- Is what I am thinking a fact or just a thought?
- If one of my friends or family members were in this situation, what would I say to them?
- What might one of my close friends or family members say to me?
- What other ways can I look at this situation?
- Are there some unknown factors that I am missing?
- In the long-run, is this situation going to be really as important as I am making it out to be now?
- Am I overgeneralizing? Am I missing the bigger picture?
- How can I think about this situation in a more balanced way?

This is a practice in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT encourages us to put out thoughts on trial and ask the type of questions listed above. Poke holes in your negative thoughts or pessimism. Often the negativity is a defense mechanism, but it does us more harm than good and steals our joy. Work hard to see things in a more realistic and balanced light.

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### Optimism Exercise #3 A Positive Future

This optimism boosting exercise involves writing about your best possible future self. This practice has been shown to improve overall happiness in research participants "for weeks" following the completion of the exercise. Also their overall health was better and they were less likely to become ill for months following the research study.

It appears that not only does doing this exercise feel good in the moment, it helps to build momentum and feelings of empowerment moving forward. Research states that by writing about their best possible future, study participants were able to make positive and meaningful changes in their lives immediately. By focusing on the ideal future, participants may have zeroed in on what they most want and value in life. This can inspire people to set goals to help them achieve their dreams.

Set aside twenty minutes each day for the next week to write about your positive future. Consider yourself one year, five years, or ten years down the road (depending on your goals and circumstances). Imagine that things have gone as well for you as you had hoped. You have achieved your goals, hopes and dreams. Allow your mind to wander and create vividly detailed images of what life looks like after achieving your desires. Write down what you have imagined, with all the details. Become immersed in the images of the future.

### Optimism Exercise #4 Explain Setbacks Like An Optimist

For this exercise, it's important that you know something about the **concept of explanatory style**. Explanatory style refers to how we explain the events that happen in our lives. When faced with a setback, optimists usually think that the situation is temporary, specific, and external. Pessimists tend to see adversities as permanent, universal and internal. Please see my handout regarding Optimistic and Pessimistic Explanatory Styles for a more in-depth explanation.

This optimism practice encourages you to notice the way in which you talk to yourself whenever setbacks or troubles occur. Over the next week, keep a record of times when things don't go your way, when something unexpected happens, or when problems occur. Notice your internal response to these circumstances. If you tend to view these things pessimistically, see if you can adopt a more optimistic attitude. Use the **explanatory style guide** to adjust your thinking. With practice, this internal dialog can become a habit. You can develop an optimistic way of looking at things rather than through the lens of pessimism. A new default way of thinking can be established.

**The idea of optimism is to acquire a more positive view of our future, while learning to view setbacks or problems realistically, in a positive manner.**

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### Optimism Exercise #5 Reflecting on Success

In order to remind ourselves that things will turn out fine, it can help to recall times when we did overcome adversity or bounced back from a setback. It's important to keep in mind our successes, achievements and victories. By reminding ourselves of these positive events, we can help keep pessimism in check.

When we are experiencing hard times, it can be difficult to clearly remember how well things went in the past. **It is best to do this exercise when you are in a positive state of mind.**

Think about a past success or achievement. Think about things you have accomplished in your work, school, hobbies, relationships, etc. Choose one specific positive victory and write about it in great detail. The details help your mind recall and re-live how good this positivity felt. The following questions might help you create your story:

- What was the nature of your success?
- How hard did you work to attain it?
- Were there times when you thought of giving up? And if so, what kept you going?
- Who did you receive support from during the process?
- What did you learn from reaching this goal?
- How does it feel to reflect on this success?

Once you have done this for one instance, repeat it with other success stories to create a collection for yourself. When setbacks, disappointments, failures, or problems occur, turn to this collection of successes to remind you that something positive coming from this new instance is also possible. You may be able to draw upon strategies, actions, or coping mechanisms from the past to create a more positive outcome with the present situation. Remember that in the past you made an impact on outcomes, and you can do that again with whatever you are facing now.

#### Resources:

Paquette, Johan, Psy.D. 2015. Real happiness: proven paths for contentment, peace & well-being. Pesi Publishing.  
Seligman, Martin, Ph.D. 2006. Learned optimism: how to change your mind and your life. Random House: New York