

By Bette-Jane Raphael



Finding Your Inner Optimist

We'd spent a beautiful day at the beach—just me, my daughter and one of her best friends. At the end of the afternoon, as we trudged back to the car, weighted down with wet towels and assorted beach paraphernalia, I heard the following exchange from the two bedraggled 9-year-olds behind me.

Friend: "The waves were so big today. I couldn't get out far enough in the water."
Daughter: "Don't worry. They'll be better tomorrow."

The statement, so flat out, airily optimistic, was like a cooling breeze. You don't hear the sounds of optimism very often these days. Economic concerns and worries about our country's health and safety make it a tough time to be an optimist.

But some people seem up to the challenge. We all know individuals who manage to maintain an upbeat outlook, even as many of us may feel our spirits flagging. How do they do it?

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Some, or course, are simply "born optimists." Psychologists agree that there is probably a genetic/biological component to the trait. But that's not me. Even in a world of eternally blue skies, I'd be Henny Penny, seeing disaster at every turn. I have to work harder than my genetically blessed fellows to find the silver lining. Happily, there is evidence to suggest that I can catch up to them if I try. Martin E. P. Seligman, Ph.D., a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of *Learned Optimism*, asserts that pessimists "can learn the

skills of optimism and improve the quality of their lives."

One of those skills, says Susan Vaughan, M.D., a psychiatry professor at Columbia University and the author of *Half Empty, Half Full*, is the ability of optimists to feel in charge of themselves—not that everything will go well, but that they won't be emotionally overwhelmed when things don't.

My nearly-always-cheerful friend June, recalling how she felt when she was fired after her company downsized, says that while she was unhappy about losing her job, she knew that ultimately she'd be O.K. "I remember thinking that losing the job gave me an opportunity to do other things."

Nancy, an editor friend, has a similar ability to draw back from her worries. When a terrorist alert had the country tense and frightened, she says that while she had moments of feeling afraid, she sensed that since she had no control over things, there was no point in focusing on them: "I don't obsess about things I can't change."

What Nancy and June are doing is recapturing their sense of being in charge. "They're telling themselves that they'll be O.K. because they're going to focus on what they can be O.K. with," says Vaughan. "And that keeps them from obsessing about things that scare and depress them."

Another strategy for achieving a more positive outlook, according to Vaughan, is "modulating your moods"—self-monitoring your frame of mind, and then making a commitment to move it in the right direction.

One way to brighten a blue mood is by doing things that go against it, offers Vaughan. "If you're feeling sad, you're probably going to be drawn to reading a sad novel or listening to sad music. Going against that instinct—by calling a friend to chat, say, or going out and taking a walk—can move you in the right direction."

Seligman identifies another basic tool that helps foster a more optimistic outlook. Pessimists, he writes, tend to have a negative *explanatory*

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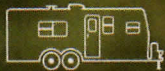
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style. In other words, if something goes right for them they explain it to themselves as a fluke, and if something goes wrong, they explain it as a result of their own shortcomings. From there they jump to the conclusion that they will always fail. In contrast, those who minimize how global, enduring and personal a failure is are more likely to be optimistic.

To counter a negative explanatory style, Seligman suggests challenging it. If something goes wrong for you, look for a blame-neutral way to explain the situation.

This kind of thinking comes naturally to my longtime friend Barbara. If something she attempts to do goes badly—if, for instance, she tries to lose weight and can't—she doesn't jump to the conclusion that she'll never be able to do it. "I remind myself that I tend to lose weight in warmer weather, when I walk more, and that I've been able to do it successfully before."

"The aim is to get yourself into a less pessimistic frame of mind by reminding yourself that you've dealt with problems in the past, and are equipped to handle the situation now," says Vaughan. "Then you are more likely to be pro-active in finding a way out of real difficulties, increasing the odds that you'll come up with a creative solution." When that happens, you feel better about yourself—and even more optimistic.

You Can Manage Your Moods

Here are several strategies Vaughan recommends for making a negative state of mind more positive.

1. Adjust your environment. Think more about how you want your surroundings to be. Try making sensory changes you think might soothe you, like more cheerful lighting or relaxing music.

2. Make downward comparisons. Remind yourself that you are better off than a lot of other people. Finish the sentence, "I'm glad I'm not..." Do it five times.

You can say things like, "I'm glad I'm not sick" or "I'm glad I'm not alone." You'll feel much more grateful and upbeat.

3. Relax your body. Any inputs that are soothing—whether from working out hard to relax your muscles or having a massage—will have a positive effect on your limbic system, an area of the brain that has a bearing on your moods.

4. Give out positive messages to others. People can dramatically affect one another's moods. You can get more

Nancy illustrated the point when she told me about the financial trouble she and her husband found themselves in several years ago. "Even when we were in a hole, I always felt we would get out of it eventually," she says. "And I think the fact that I wasn't in despair made me more solution oriented."

It didn't take her long to come up with an answer to their difficulties, realizing that if the family moved from their expensive city apartment to a suburb not too far away, they could live much more frugally. That's what they ultimately did, and the successful transition made Nancy feel optimistic about her ability to handle any other problems they might encounter in the future.

"Ultimately," concludes Vaughan, "the only thing you can control is how you're feeling. Once you become confident that you can be in charge of your responses to all of life's inevitable adversities, you'll be a more positive person—because you'll trust that, whatever happens, you'll land on your feet."

That's where my daughter landed when she jumped into the surf the day after her optimistic prediction. She'd been wrong; the waves were as high as they had been the day before. But that didn't stop her. She loves the ocean and knew she could negotiate the swells, so she plunged in and had a wonderful time. Just watching her, I felt my spirits soar.

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