



RUNNING ON EMPTY? **Learn to Be an Optimist**

How often do you hear, *My glass is always half full*, or, *Her glass is always half empty*?

What do these sayings really mean?

Most commonly, they refer to levels of optimism and how people look at life. A place where the glass is half full seems better.

Optimism is defined as a feeling or belief that good things will happen in the future¹ — an outlook or attitude that can influence thoughts and behavior.



Ample evidence suggests that an optimistic outlook is much better than a pessimistic one. Martin Seligman, a University of Pennsylvania faculty member, researcher, and author, shared more than 25 years of studies in *Learned Optimism: How to Change*

Your Mind and Your Life. Some of his findings include²:

- Optimists perform much better in school and at work.
- Optimists regularly exceed the predictions of aptitude tests.
- Optimists are more likely to be elected to public office.
- Optimists usually have good health and age better.
- Optimists may live longer.

The Peril of Pessimism

Sally Starbuck Stamp experienced a real-life example of learned optimism while writing this article. She describes herself as positive and optimistic, but her example shows how easily a person can lapse into the peril of pessimism.

Sally received conflicting diagnoses that impacted the rehabilitation of her recent knee injury:

SCENARIO 1

- She thinks the treatment (or lack thereof) and the state of human healthcare in general is deplorable.
- She feels frustrated and remains focused on the negativity of the experience.

SCENARIO 2

- She understands her injury is not life-threatening and the system is overburdened.
- She feels a degree of empathy for the clinic team members who are trying to help and focuses on finding ways to use her coaching skills more effectively when managing the situation.

Scenario 1 was obvious and even appealing, at first. When faced with adversity, it can be difficult to see the silver lining or feel hopeful that all will end well. If these beliefs are expressed to others, there may be significant support and even encouragement to stay in the downward spiral of negativity because most people have experienced a similar scenario.

Shifting to Scenario 2 was not easy because the negativity of Scenario 1 made it difficult to switch from an adverse reaction to positivity. Positivity increases one's awareness of possibilities that can lead to an expanded array of choices.

Most people cycle back and forth between optimism and pessimism until they can land on their feet and move forward again. It is necessary to allow time to regain balance and seek support from others who will encourage resilience.

In a *Harvard Business Review* article, social psychologist, motivational speaker, and author Heidi Grant Halvorson agrees that optimism is a good thing that can help motivate individuals to achieve their goals.³ However, she cautions against the “vital difference between believing you can succeed and believing you will succeed easily.”

Halvorson cites the findings from a weight-loss study that compared the results of participants who felt they could achieve their desired weight-loss goal easily with those who faced challenges and obstacles but still believed they would achieve their goals; the former lost at least 20 pounds *fewer* than the latter. The realistic optimist understands the importance of making things happen rather than simply expecting a desired outcome, Halvorson said.³

Evidence also supports the premise that optimism increases resiliency. Seligman's research showed that optimism and pessimism relate to what

he termed “explanatory style,” best described as how people look at setbacks or unfortunate circumstances or events. The optimist sees these challenges as temporary, but the pessimist sees them as much more permanent and likely to adversely affect everything he or she does. The optimist tends to depersonalize misfortune, whereas the pessimist blames him- or herself.⁴

Researcher Barbara L. Fredrickson added to this evidence in her numerous studies of resilience that found that resilient people do not use positivity to mask misfortune’s reality or severity—they are better at letting go of negativity, worrying less, and shifting from negative to positive more quickly.⁵

People respond to this information differently, thinking:

- This information confirms that the situation is hopeless.
- This information poses a challenge to work toward the clearly beneficial state of increased optimism.

Clearly, the second way of thinking is the more optimistic view. More importantly, such optimism can be learned, according to Seligman.⁴

Take the First Step

Self-awareness is a good first step toward behavior change. Take the free Learned Optimism Test,⁶ and then focus on learning to be optimistic based on the score.

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Next, consider the following ways to raise optimism levels:

- Avoiding the tendency to self-blame when bad things happen
- Challenging inner voices that perpetuate negative framing
- Analyzing success experiences in terms of what worked rather than what did not
- Spending more time with positive, optimistic people
- Practicing Seligman’s ABCs⁷:
 - Adversity:** *Thoughts following an adverse experience become*
 - Beliefs,** *which determine the actions to be taken and lead to*
 - Consequences.**

See **The Peril of Pessimism** for an illustration of this model.

Conclusion

As Winston Churchill poignantly said, “The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty.”

Whether a glass is half full or half empty may not be most important. Instead, the focus should be on understanding how pessimism can limit the resourcefulness and self-trust that

allow normal setbacks and challenges to be managed.

If you think you are running on empty, think about how you can fill your glass to the top. 

Editor’s note: *Dr. Jeff Thoren and Sally Starbuck Stamp are certified coaches who have worked together for 10 years. Their combined experiences in coaching, consulting, and training, coupled with education and experience in animal and human health care, allow them to offer relevant comment on the challenges facing veterinary professionals.*

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