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## Optimism

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## Optimism

by Jennifer Elsman

(English 1102)

**Y**ou woke up this morning. You take a moment to think about what you are going to do on this day. As you start to eat your bowl of Apple Jacks, you realize that you are running late for work. Minutes later you bolt out the door. You get into your car and you slam your foot on the gas pedal. Next thing you know, WHAM! You smack into a telephone pole. You regain consciousness and there is tons of smoke, blood, sirens and strange people all around you. The scariest part is that you have no feeling in either of your legs. An ambulance rushes you to the hospital. Once things have calmed down, the doctor comes in and drops the bomb on you: you will most likely never walk again and live the rest of your life in a wheelchair. In a split second your life seems like it will never be the same. Financial security, career, independence and survival all become factors that come into play. Sure, you will be depressed for a while, but will you let it eat you alive? Will you sit back and allow it to even though you are going to be in a wheelchair? Your world has collapsed. What will you do now? You have to get out your hammer and nails. Your optimism is your hammer and what you do with your optimism is your nails. In order to continue on and give your life meaning and substance, you must secure each nail with your hammer, optimism.

You are now home from the hospital, in your wheelchair, trying to regain a slice of happiness back into your life. What do you do? You turn on a ball game and watch your favorite sports team play. Your favorite team that you always root for, time and time again, continuously says “this will be the year” and “we will do it.” How long have you been hearing this? Your entire life! It is the same thing EVERY year. They get to the point where they can be within reach of the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, yet they still seem so far away and blow their big moment. Why do you put up with this? Are you getting any benefits out of it? Some like to say it is because of stupidity or insanity. At times you shake your head, pound your fists or throw something at the television. Every time you say “I give up on them” yet you constantly go back for more all the time. Your reasons for staying true could be simply because you are loyal or a die-hard fan. The biggest reason is that you have optimism in yourself and in them.

What is optimism? Optimism can be defined as when you have hope that things will get better. When things go good for you, you expect the good to continue. When you are optimistic, it allows you to deal with difficult and stressful situations in a more positive, beneficial matter. Optimism makes friends. “Finding your own good work is likely to land you in good company.” (Zuboff) Optimism “can help us sustain a mental focus and provides an expansive field in which the ego can function properly.” (Trans4mind)

How do you develop optimism? Remaining positive is a huge key factor. You will have to believe that the best will happen for you. Thinking that your glass is half full instead of being half empty is being optimistic. Below are some key factors on which you can build optimism within yourself:

- ❖ Keep your expectations realistic
- ❖ Do not dwell on your problems but create solutions
- ❖ Focus on the good things that have happened in your life
- ❖ Have a goal so you have something to fight for when the going gets tough
- ❖ Think and visualize positive, happy thoughts

- ❖ Accept the things that you cannot control or change
- ❖ Realize that you are human and that you will make mistakes
- ❖ Have a positive attitude
- ❖ Appreciate everything and everybody around you

Optimists give it their all when they try to achieve something. They are able to climb a steeper mountain in life and reach the peak of it. They have more successes and confidence in their lives. When you have optimism, you are able to “maintain your momentum despite the inevitable failure.” (Trans4mind) Optimists scope out the entire picture and “measure on person at a time. If everyone gives up, we are doomed.” (Zuboff) In “Optimism is Good for You,” Julia Barnard tells us that optimistic people believe:

- ❖ Bad things are temporary
- ❖ They confine bad events to that particular situation
- ❖ Bad events are not their fault

Your health is one of the greatest gifts that you will be blessed with in your lifetime. It is your job to do your best to maintain it and to never take it for granted. Having optimism in your life and using it to its highest potential, is a key factor in maintaining your health. When you have optimism in your life, you reap such benefits as:

- ❖ Living a longer life
- ❖ Lower risk of suffering from depression
- ❖ Lower risk of having a heart attack or stroke
- ❖ Resistance to fight off colds is higher
- ❖ Ability to cope with stress is greater
- ❖ Suffer from less anxiety disorders
- ❖ Overall psychological and physiological well being stays in better shape
- ❖ Save money on your overall medical expenses since you stay healthier

In 2009, a study was presented at the American Psychosomatic Society’s meeting. The results were amazing. Women who were less optimistic had a higher death rate. In her article, “Look on the Bright Side--You May Live Longer: an Optimistic Outlook on Life Could Keep You Healthier, Longer--so Train Yourself to See the Upside,” Susan Evans informs us that there is an actual therapy that you can obtain to help you gain optimism.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can be very useful in helping people to recognize how negative thinking influences their moods and behaviors. In CBT, individuals learn skills aimed at identifying and modifying their thinking, and this can contribute to an increased sense of well-being and lead to more positive behaviors. (Look on the Brightside)

What does optimism do for your brain? Does it force that hamster inside of your head to jump on its hamster wheel and start running? According to the article, “Hardwired for Optimism,” we do see that hamster wheel jump into motion.

In a recent study conducted at New York University, cognitive neuroscientist Elizabeth Phelps and her former graduate student Tali Sharot used functional magnetic resonance imaging to reveal that our brains are far more active when we

sugarcoat the future than when we are negative about what's going to happen.  
(Hardwired for Optimism)

Having optimism can bring you so many positive things within your life. One of the greatest gifts you can obtain from it is optimal health and psychological well-being.

In a study of clinically depressed patients, it was discovered that 12 weeks of cognitive therapy (which involves reframing a person's thought processes) worked better than drugs, as changes were more long-lasting than a temporary fix. Patients who had this training in optimism had the ability to more effectively handle future setbacks. (Scott)

This study proves that optimism is more powerful than medication. It also means that a person is in more control of getting themselves healthier than their own doctor. A person can be their own cure. It is totally up to a person to be the prescription or the malignant tumor in their life. As human beings, we have the ability to help us to sustain a mental focus. We can direct our thoughts toward constructive problem-solving, instead of being stuck dwelling in the distractions of pessimism and worry. Optimism provides an expansive field in which leaves the ego with great responsibility. We are giving permission for the ego to work toward our goals. In contrast, pessimism cripples the ego's ability to work at its own maximum potential by giving implied instructions that its natural goals are not to be attained.

University of Pennsylvania's Martin Seligman, Ph.D., and Gregory Buchanan, Ph.D. conducted a controlled study to see how people's health would be affected by having optimism or lack of it in their lives. They invited incoming freshman to fill out a survey about their coping abilities and attitudes on different situations in their lives. They were invited to attend either the 16-hour workshop or a control group. Workshop participants learned to argue their chronic negative thoughts as well as learned social and work skills that can help eliminate their depression. The results were not very shocking and help prove the point of how beneficial having optimism is in a person's life.

After an 18-month follow-up, the preliminary findings showed that 22 percent of the workshop participants had suffered moderate or severe depression by blind clinical diagnosis, compared with 32 percent of the control group subjects. Also, only 7 percent of the workshop participants suffered from a moderate or severe anxiety disorder, compared with 15 percent of the control group. (Discovery Health)

These findings just prove the point that optimism affects our health. By having great physical and psychological health, you are able to obtain personal and professional goals and aspirations by having your health. Your good health allows you to be more of a successful person in your everyday life. Thus, optimism becomes not only beneficial but one of your best friends to get you through your everyday trials and tribulations that come knocking on your door every day.

Very often within your lifetime, you will find challenges and encounter a crisis here and there where you need an over abundance of optimism to help get you through your dilemma. Sometimes when you have the required optimism, you do not always get what you wanted or what you had planned for in the long run.

Legendary Chicago Bears running back, Walter "Sweetness" Payton is a prime example of somebody who had the greatest amount of optimism that a person could obtain in their entire lifetime. In his book *Never Die Easy*, he talks about different aspects that show how much of an optimistic person he was, on and off the field. Walter grew up in Mississippi during a time when

African Americans and Caucasians attended segregated schools and churches. He did not grow up with nearly the amount of material wealth that he had when he passed away. He asks us “what is poor? We had food. We dressed well. We didn’t have a lot but what we had fit, and it was always neat.” Even as a youth, Walter looked at his entire surroundings as his glass half full instead of his glass half empty. He went on to have a successful college football career and allowed for his optimistic attitude to shine there. He was so successful there he was drafted by the Chicago Bears and the rest is history. Walter was not even close to being physically the biggest player on the field. If you were to measure a player by their heart and positive attitude, Walter was by far the biggest. He took his optimism and ran with it, setting a long standing NFL rushing record. With that optimism, physically bigger players could not stop him.

Walter Payton’s optimism did not pay off for him, or so it seemed, at one point in his life. In 1998, Walter was diagnosed with primary sclerosing cholangitis, a liver disease; he was given 1 to 2 years to live without a liver transplant. Months later, he was diagnosed with cancer of the bile duct and that the cancer had spread to his lymph nodes. Devastating news for any person too hear. The cancer had spread very rapidly outside of his liver and the liver transplant was no longer an option. Think about that for a minute. What would you do if you were in Walter Payton’s football cleats at that given moment? Do you hang up those football cleats, get angry, have self pity and look at your glass as being near empty? Walter did not, not even until he took his very last breath of life. Walter’s optimism became very apparent to everybody around him at this time. He tells us that “you have to accept what they tell you, because if you ever go into denial, you waste time.” (Payton 207) Walter decided to take the attitude that his glass was not almost empty. Walter said that “I do not feel sorry for myself, because that’s the first step towards giving up and I’m not giving up. I know something good has to come out of this. I just haven’t figured out what it is yet.” (Payton 225) He grew to accept what he knew was quickly approaching him faster than he ever ran in his life. Walter soon passed away. He was dying but he took the most positive, optimistic approach anybody could expect. “If you ask me how I want to be remembered, it is as a winner. A winner is somebody who has given their best effort, who has tried the hardest they possibly can, who has utilized every ounce of energy and strength within them to accomplish something.” (Payton 248) Walter got his wish.

Walter’s optimism to the average eye did not seem like it had paid off in the end. Or had it? Was there more to the legend’s story? After Walter Payton’s death, organ donation drastically increased. People throughout the state of Illinois signed up to be organ donors. The Walter Payton Liver Center, where patients can go to get treatment for their liver, was created. Because of these two things, people’s lives are being saved. Like Walter said, “again, I go back to what Mike Ditka said, how in death you can give life, and there is no better gift than that.” (Payton 226) Walter’s optimism did pay off in the end and it all became a full circle. Walter’s illness and death was not the plan or what was wanted at the beginning. Those football cleats are still running, just in a different way and on a different football field.

Optimism brings great things into your life. How you decide to use it will influence what you obtain in the end. According to Maxwell Gladwell’s article “Cocksure,” we become overconfident “we start to blur the line between the kinds of things that we can control and the kinds of things that we can’t.” This can be seen, according to him, as “arrogance or hubris.” It can also be seen as living in a state of denial or living within their own fantasy world. Are these optimistic people crazy or is just plain being stuck on them?

Psychologist Ellen Langer once had subjects engage in a betting game against either a self-assured, well-dressed opponent or a shy and badly dressed opponent (in Langer’s delightful phrasing, the “dapper” or the “schnook” condition), and she found that her subjects bet far more aggressively when they played against the schnook. They looked at their awkward opponent and thought, I’m better than he is. Yet the game

was pure chance: all the players did was draw cards at random from a deck, and see who had the high hand. (Gladwell)

Competition can bring out the worst of our use of our optimism. We can get sloppy, make mistakes and alienate those around ourselves Langer argues:

This is what competition does to all of us; because ability makes a difference in competitions of skill, we make the mistake of thinking that it must also make a difference in competitions of pure chance. Other studies have reached similar conclusions. As novices, we don't trust our judgment. Then we have some success, and begin to feel a little surer of ourselves. Finally, we get to the top of our game and succumb to the trap of thinking that there's nothing we can't master. As we get older and more experienced, we overestimate the accuracy of our judgments, especially when the task before us is difficult and when we're involved with something of great personal importance. (Gladwell)

Figuring out when your over abundance of optimism is positive or negative can be a difficult and it is a work in progress. It can be a hurdle but you have to keep jumping the hurdles and not let over optimism get to your head and that is key.

From an individual perspective, it is hard to distinguish between the times when excessive optimism is good and the times when it isn't. All that we can say unequivocally is that overconfidence is, as Wrangham puts it, "globally maladaptive." When one opponent bluffs, he can score an easy victory. But when everyone bluffs, Wrangham writes, rivals end up "escalating conflicts that only one can win and suffering higher costs than they should if assessment were accurate. (Gladwell)

When you have optimism in your life, all your hopes and dreams are put into this one bottle. Your bottle is at least half if not almost close to being full. We become exhilarated with joy and enthusiasm when the plan or outcome we had expected happens to us and those around us. What happens when we drink too much of our bottle of optimism? Do we get drunk?

The Chicago Cubs and their fans are the perfect example of getting drunk in the DVD documentary, "We Believe." Chicago Cubs fans are the "red, white and blue of America." Year after year after year after year, the Chicago Cubs fans put all their hopes and dreams into their favorite team. These neurotic fans do not just see their glass as half full, they "see their glass as being 5/8 full." Some of these fans actually "believe that they are on a mission from God." They truly have believed this since after they won the 1908 World Series. The fans are always telling us that this will be the year, EVERY year. They truly have believed this since after the Chicago Cubs won the 1908 World Series. Every year they pack into Wrigley Field, filling up almost every seat in the ballpark. They show up to the ballpark day after day after day no matter if their favorite team wins or loses. Rain or shine, hot or cold, Chicago Cubs fans are there. These people play hooky from work, skip school and are more than willing to put their day to day responsibilities on hold for their glimmer of hope and optimism. These fans continue to purchase their season tickets year after year after year for what? Fans are willing to spend hundreds of dollars over the face value for a ticket. Their biggest hope for the game they are attending is to be able to sing the song, "Go Cubs Go," at the end of every game. If you look up the meaning of optimism in *Webster's* dictionary, the definition should be a Chicago Cubs fan. Chicago Cubs fans truly bring the abuse they endure onto themselves. These fans do not believe there is a curse holding their favorite team hostage. By the time September rolls

around, no matter where the Chicago Cubs are in the standings, they still believe the Chicago Cubs can do the unthinkable. Once the playoffs begin, their optimism shatters their heart, every time. They have wasted their money to see the results that all their hopes and dreams were banked on. "If you are a pessimist with the Chicago Cubs, you will be right 90% of the time and pleasantly surprised the other 10%." What is the point of all this? Cubs fans end up going through depression once it is all said and done – every time. Do Cubs fans have true optimism or are they stupid almost to the point of insanity?

The relationship between the Chicago Cubs and their fans is beyond complex. "There's a co-dependence between the Chicago Cubs and their loyal and optimistic fans." Being a fan of this disappointing team "is not meant for results orientated people." It is amazing how the relationship lasts for a lifetime between this team and their fans. "The love affair between the fans and the Cubs is complex and passionate." The optimism that the fans have for their Chicago Cubs is disappointing and heart breaking. Could this FINALLY be the year that these fans get a break from their heartbreaking optimism? "Maybe it is a bad relationship but they will stay. There's always next year."

What happens when you get over confident with your optimism? Do you get the results you had planned and hoped for? Sometimes when you have too much optimism, it can totally crush you and those around you in the end. Take the 2008 Chicago Cubs, for example. All I can say is 100% heartbreak and devastation. This team had the World Series in the palms of their hands. They were picked to go all the way. The Chicago Cubs finished their 2008 regular season with a 97-64 record, the second best in major league baseball that season. They tied a National league record of having eight players selected to the All-Star team. Their rookie catcher Geovanny Soto was selected as Rookie of the Year. It was the first time in fifteen years a catcher had been given that honor. The stars were aligned for this team. They were bound to obtain the top honor they had been dreaming about just by winning four playoff games. Seems pretty easy for them to be able to grab these games with their gloves and run to the bank with it. Their optimism shined so bright and they were ready. The problem was that the Chicago Cubs were too ready and too confident. They gave up six errors in three games. They gave up twenty runs and only scored six runs within these three games. They lost three games straight in the playoffs and they were eliminated in a blink of an eye. The Chicago Cubs had won thirteen more games in the regular season than the Los Angeles Dodgers. Their average was 6.02 compared to the Dodgers 5.19. The problem in this tragic scenario is not that they and their fans did not get what they wanted. The problem was the team and coaching thought they were invincible. It was obvious at the time their optimism got the best of them. It became all about ego and that ego emptied their bottle of optimism faster than a snap of the fingers. The Chicago Cubs became drunk on their own optimism. One hundred-two years and counting!!!

Optimism is not only important for our health, but it is essential for our country right now. We are at such a negative point currently, that having optimism is going to be a key factor for our country to find its way out of its crisis. We have seen drastic improvements in technology, education and treatments for diseases but we have such a far way to go. Our country is at war, we have suffered a beyond devastating terrorist attack in 2001 and we are on the verge of financial ruin. Unemployment is at an all time high. Homes are being foreclosed on every minute of every day. What makes American citizens hold on to their American dream? Their optimism is what keeps their dream alive when it seems like it is burning out. A poll conducted by USA Today / Gallup gives us the evidence that these citizens are not giving up yet. (Majority of Americans Optimistic About U.S. in the Future)

What is truly amazing is that these Americans cannot hold onto a dollar bill, their jobs or even their homes. They can lose the clothes on their backs, live in a cardboard box and they still hold onto their optimism for their great country. The statistics show that no matter what they have gone through, Americans hold onto their optimism to get them through. Another interesting statistic that is

shown is that since we have had our first African American President elected into office, our optimism has gone down. What happened to “Yes we can?” What is ironic, is when President Barack Obama was first elected into office, it made people become more optimistic. President Obama tells us in his speech, “Why I’m Optimistic,” that “there is no way of knowing how life will be different in 2050. But if we do what’s required in our own time, I am confident the future will be brighter for our people and our country.” (Obama) President Obama holds optimism not only in himself but the citizens of this country. President Obama had requested several items from the Smithsonian National Museum of American History to display in the Oval Office and uses them as a reminder he says:

For me, they are a reminder of what has always defined America’s people: our spirit; a restless searching for the right solution to any problem; an inclination to dream big dreams, and an insistence on making those dreams come true; and enduring faith, even in the darkest hours, that brighter days lie ahead. (Obama)

Does having religious faith have an effect on whether a person is optimistic? The answer is yes. People that have a strong religious faith tend to get their optimism just from the sense that they have that Jesus has their back. I conducted an interview with the two most optimistic people I know personally, my friends Rick and Steve. I asked them both which famous person they hold the most optimism in and they both responded, Jesus. At the same time they also responded that in their personal lives, they hold the most optimism in Jesus. Both of them stated to me that they learned to be optimistic knowing that their faith will always get them through. Steve explained to me that he is optimistic because “that is my only option that I will ever have. I have to be a winner.” He is 100% correct about that. Having optimism has also helped them overcome obstacles. Rick told me that “optimism keeps you calm and thinking clearly so that you can make good decisions, not ones based out of panic.” If this entire country had the optimism that these two men have, we would conquer so many problems that we have helped create.

Is there a secret to grabbing and maintaining optimism while we are living in a world of uncertainty? You can decide to turn off all communication with the outside world. You can curl up in bed with your teddy bear and blanket and just give up on life when it gets tough. What you need to obtain is the secret to having optimism. When you read the book *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne, you gain incredible insight on how to have optimism in money, happiness, relationships, the world, life and yourself. Byrne tells us that “you are like a human transmission tower, transmitting a frequency with your thoughts.” (Byrne 25) The decision is within you to decide to make the change. She also informs us that:

The more you use the power within you, the more you will draw it to you. You will reach a point where you won’t need to practice it anymore, because you will Be the power, you will Be the perfection, you will Be the wisdom, you will Be the intelligence, you will Be the love, you will Be the joy. (Byrne 182)

You have the capability of making the decision to start using your optimism and once you start, you will eventually not have to try. It will eventually come naturally to you just like riding a bicycle.

You can decide what to do with optimism. You can take it and believe in yourself, friends, family and your country. You can be like Walter Payton, have no self-pity and leave a legacy behind. You can be like the Chicago Cubs and their fans and decide to sit on the brink of insanity year, after year, after year and NEVER give up. The choice is yours. You might be in a wheelchair right now but you can still run like Payton did. Optimism can be your running cleats in life. Take yourself and your optimism and tie them together. You and your optimism are your shoelaces. Your laces will be tied and you will be able to walk again.



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