

# How Optimists and Pessimists Think and Behave



By Dr Granville D'Souza

Certain people can put their troubles neatly into a box and go about their lives even when one part of it, their job or love life, is suffering. Optimists, however, should not be seen as blindly being positive in the face of crisis. They are able to deal with them as they happen. They adjust their thinking and look for possibilities and a way forward. Conversely, pessimists take every setback as a potential catastrophe.

**THE** statistics on optimism are revealing. “Optimists cope better with stress, experience fewer negative moods and have a healthier lifestyle, all of which could lead to a stronger immune system,” says Suzanne Segerstrom, lead author of a study on optimism. This is just a fragment of much research that expound the benefits of optimism

Optimism is about identifying and adopting the necessary steps to sustain continuous action towards the goal of positive outcomes. Optimism is more than just thinking positively. Optimists believe they will accomplish what they set out to do, and even if it takes time, or if they encounter obstacles and problems, they are not discouraged.

Optimists have a different definition of failure, which they consider as opportunities to shift and adjust before starting over again. Hence, opportunities abound in their lives because they see endless inroads to finding solutions to problems and challenges. Optimists have expectations that things will eventually turn out all right, and if they



do not, there are reasons to explain the initial setbacks; roadblocks are only temporary obstacles and can be changed.

While there is a place for pessimism in certain circumstances, more has been written on the benefits and opportunities in being optimistic. Optimism allows us to move beyond our present circumstances and respond to possibilities within our control. This skill of exercising optimism blends thinking and feeling to shift beliefs and attitudes to a more proactive stance. As we sometimes invoke our capabilities to tackle challenges and deal with failure, similarly optimists choose to rise above their challenges by looking through a constructive lens, which inspires learning and growth. They see opportunities where others dread and moan about failure, and deal with the consequences and corresponding emotional pressures.

Optimism can be seen as a form of prayer. We open our hearts to new possibilities with a child-like curiosity, welcoming each day with a smile, and learning to take whatever happens in stride—the good with the bad; the beautiful with the ugly; the light with the dark; and happiness with a pinch of salt.

Here are examples of people who carved a place in history for having high levels of optimism and were proactive in achieving astounding results in the face of extreme obstacles.

- **Thomas Edison:** The inventor of the light bulb completed 999 prototypes before he was able to create the model that worked and ushered in the era of electricity. He took the failures as lessons and never gave up.

- **Steve Jobs:** Many people know him as an innovator, a revolutionary, and a creative genius. During his time at Apple Inc, he has influenced the computer, music, and phone industries like no other. Yet many people don't know that in the early 1990s, he was fired from Apple. He reportedly had emotional challenges, including a temperament that created interpersonal problems. He pursued his own projects and returned to a floundering Apple in 1997. Since then, Jobs has managed to transform Apple from a struggling enterprise to a company that has a market value of over US\$300 billion and is a global leader in innovation.

- **Abraham Lincoln:** He battled numerous obstacles during his lifetime before becoming one of the most well-known American presidents. Lincoln lost his first campaign for public office in 1832 and suffered a nervous breakdown in 1836. He was defeated for the position of Speaker in 1838, and again lost the nomination for Congress in 1843. In 1854 and 1858, he was defeated in his bid for a senator's seat, and in 1856, lost the nomination to be vice president.

- **Lance Armstrong:** He fought testicular cancer, which spread to the brain, and yet made a

full recovery and still managed to win his seventh Tour de France title after undergoing debilitating chemotherapy.

- **Helen Keller:** At 19 months, she suddenly lost her hearing and vision, and then went on to fight against severe odds with dogged persistence and optimism that would put many able-bodied people to shame. She is remembered as an advocate for people with disabilities and women's rights.

- **Mother Teresa:** She was a living saint who left her country to serve "the poorest of poor" in Kolkata's slums because that's where she saw her true calling.

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### Profile of an Optimist

We all make mistakes, and when things go wrong, we must be mindful of how we explain the events to ourselves and others. University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman believes that the language we use will directly have an impact on our beliefs and attitudes about the event and inevitably how we behave.

The explanatory style we use has three features: Permanence, pervasiveness, and personalisation.

Optimists and pessimists use them in different contexts as shown in *Figure 1*. One of the ways of handling unproductive thoughts is to recognise that a dichotomous understanding of these explanations can flip your beliefs and attitudes from unproductive to productive.

- **Permanent/Temporary:** Pessimists believe a setback could be a permanent feature. Optimists believe it is a temporary blip in their life.

- **Pervasive/Isolated:** Pessimists believe everything they touch turns into coal. Optimists believe everything they touch can be turned into gold.

- **Personalised/Resilient:** Pessimists wallow in pity and self-grief. They begin to blame luck, fate, chance, and themselves for their failures. Optimists hold themselves responsible and accountable for their actions, successes, and failures in life. When they fail, they pick themselves up and start afresh with a change of strategy.

People who give up easily have the habit of thinking that their unlucky experiences will last forever. They'd say: "This is the story of my life. It's going to undermine everything I do. It's because I am a failure. I failed."



Optimists, on the contrary, say: "It's going to quickly go away. It was unfortunate. Besides, there's much more to life. I will move on."

### Techniques to Cultivate Positive Thinking Using the ABCD Formula

The ABCD formula, which stands for Activating event-Belief-Consequences-Disputation, allows us to work through a pessimistic thought and invoke a shade of optimism into our life.

When adversity strikes (Activating event), work on your Belief system (your reaction), and the Consequence (your outcome) will change accordingly if you spend sufficient time Disputing the evidence or the belief. We frequently accept negative circumstances as a phase that we just have to go through, treat it as karma or remain helpless until it's all over instead of spending time to find alternative solutions, ideas, and perspectives.

Certain people can put their troubles neatly into a box and go about their lives even when one part of it, their job or love life, is suffering. Optimists, however, should not be seen as blindly being positive in the face of crisis and sweeping their challenges under the carpet to be revisited some time in the future. They are able to deal with them as they happen. They adjust their thinking and look for possibilities and a way forward.

Conversely, pessimists take every setback as a potential catastrophe. Their whole universe is rocked when the going gets rough. The conse-

**Figure 1: Two Groups' View of Positive and Negative Factors**

Success, Achievement, Fortune	Adversity, Failure, Mistakes
<p><b>Optimist</b> Permanent (This will continue)</p> <p>Pervasive (Will succeed in other areas)</p> <p>Personal (Because of my effort)</p>	<p><b>Optimist</b> Temporary (This will pass)</p> <p>Isolated (It's only one area, incident)</p> <p>Resilient (I can do something)</p>
<p><b>Pessimist</b> Temporary (This will pass)</p> <p>Isolated (It's only one area, incident)</p> <p>Powerless (Luck made this happen)</p>	<p><b>Pessimist</b> Permanent (This will continue)</p> <p>Pervasive (Ruining everything)</p> <p>Personal (Something wrong with me)</p>

quences of this attitude can be severe. They blame themselves and begin to think they are failures. They are likely to think "I'm stupid. I invited this trouble." The optimist believes that negative events have specific causes. In contrast, pessimists believe that negative events have universal powerless or personal causes and that good events only occur once in a while or by chance.

### Counting Your Blessings

What allows certain people to fight the fight after repeated setbacks is their ability to extract the lessons and use them as future resources as opposed to dwelling on the pain and horror of the experience. According to Seligman, how people explain events and situations to themselves determines if they can achieve a state of optimism. Optimists look at the bigger picture rather than getting mired down in the small, negative details.

Try this mantra:

"It's neither a curse nor a blessing. I accept the situation as it is."

Ask yourself these questions:

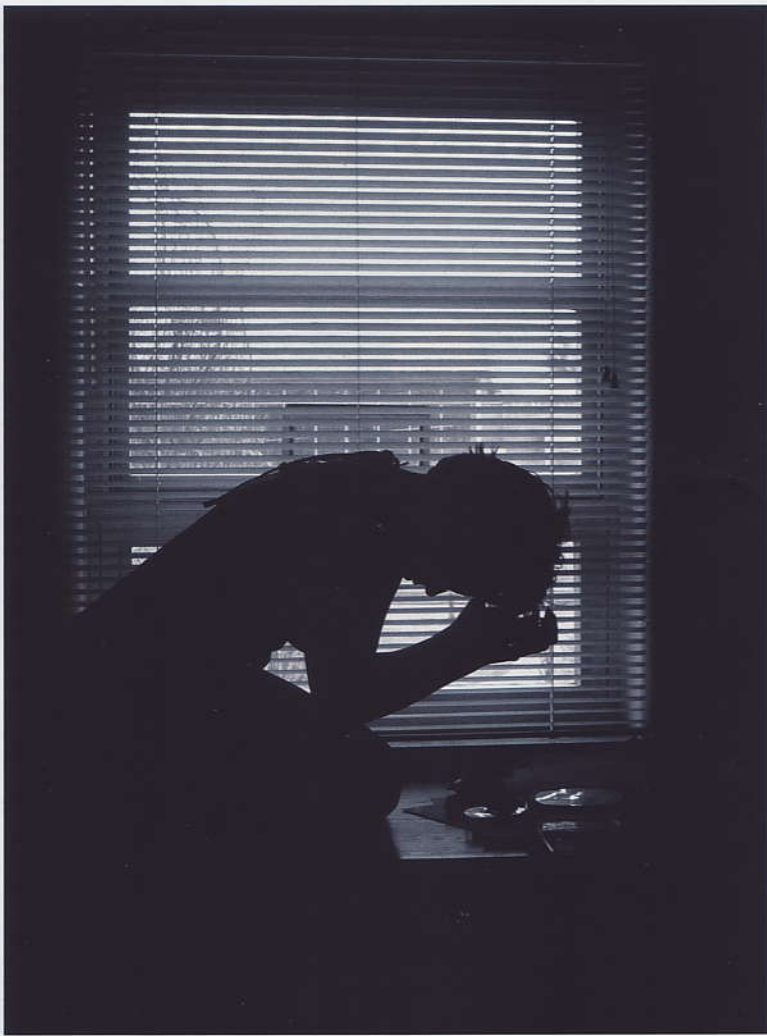
*If a colleague is troubling you or causing you much worry and frustration, in what way could this be a blessing?*

Perhaps learning new ways to respond might help you handle more toxic people. Perhaps finding out the source of your colleague's behaviour would teach you what you should avoid. Perhaps this might be the best time to show support and make a new friend out of an enemy.



Optimists adjust their thinking and look for possibilities and a way forward.





Pessimists take every setback as a potential catastrophe.

*If you lose your job, in what way could this be a blessing?*

Perhaps the job loss can teach you to value every moment when you have one. Perhaps it's giving you a period to focus on something you have always wanted to do but never got down to doing. Maybe it's time to take stock of your own life and what your personal mission is really about. Maybe it's telling you it's time to go back to school and take those classes you've been putting off.

*If you have a long-term illness or one that is challenging you, in what way could this be a blessing?*

Perhaps you finally realise that you've been neglecting yourself and need to make a lifestyle change. It's time to take that much needed sabbatical and recuperate fully. Perhaps you will now treasure every moment of having a healthy body and change your diet for the better. Perhaps you can now be an example and a resource for others who are going through your plight.

*If you lose out on an opportunity, what might have changed your present circumstances?*

Perhaps you were really not ready. You realise what you really didn't possess in terms of experience and skill and it's time you pursue those missing

links that make you more complete. Something bigger awaits you possibly. The pain of loss could motivate you to work harder to find something even more fulfilling.

It is important to have a habit of checking your thoughts. The next time a crisis hits, ask yourself: "If there was a higher purpose for this happening, what would it be?"

Optimists have a healthy sense of self-regard and acknowledge that problems will always be there, however, they can be given different labels. Once we can see our challenging experiences as gifts and opportunities, they teach us that jumping through such hoops and crossing obstacles can only strengthen one's endurance to take on life's experiences with enthusiasm. ✍

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