

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Becoming More Optimistic

Pessimism is a habit as much as it is anything else. Like any habit, it can be changed if one is willing to put in the effort. The best method for dealing with habitual pessimism is to learn how to dispute (argue against) pessimistic thoughts as they arise. The disputing process has several steps:

First, you must learn to identify which thoughts are pessimistic thoughts; a process requiring some self-awareness.

Once you have identified a pessimistic thought, you must examine it to see how reasonable that thought is. Ask yourself, "Is there really any good reason why this thought is pessimistic?" If not, you'll know how to dispute the thought.

Biased or exaggerated thoughts (thoughts that are pessimistic for no good reason) must then be corrected with more realistic ones.

To illustrate this process, imagine that you have to give a speech for work or school. Despite preparing for the speech, you find yourself nervous at the prospect of speaking in front of people. If you are pessimistic, you'll likely believe that something negative will occur when you speak; people will hate what you have to say, will laugh at your poor delivery and your life will be ruined. The first step in disputing is to recognize that such a thought is pessimistic. You can tell this thought is pessimistic because of its overly negative tone and the absence of evidence that the feared outcomes would actually happen. You can dispute this thought by thinking more realistically about what the worst case scenario might be if your speech isn't well received. Chances are, the speech will go fine. Even if a few people don't like what you say, it is unlikely that your life will actually be ruined. Who knows? Maybe people will even like your speech. Choose to focus on the positive possibilities, and counter your negative fears with realistic judgments and possibilities.

But Not Foolishly So

Though the optimistic tendency to look on the bright side of things and to expect good things to happen is a good overall personality trait to have, it is not appropriate to be blindly optimistic in all circumstances. For example, it's not a good idea to be optimistic about the weather when planning for an outdoor event because despite your best wishes for sunshine and blue sky, it might rain and storm instead. In such circumstances, cautious optimism is the way to go. Plan for your event, but also have a "Plan B" ready in the event of rain. Consider the cost of failure when deciding how optimistic to be about a given situation. If the cost of failure is high, you should be cautious about being blindly optimistic that your optimistic plan will work out. On the other hand, if the cost of failure is low, it is healthier to adopt an optimistic attitude than a pessimistic one.

Being optimistic makes the most sense when:

- You are in an achievement situation, such as selling merchandise, working on a difficult report, or competing in a sporting event
- You feel sad or depressed or need to improve how you feel
- You are faced with a long-term situation that affects your health

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Being cautious makes more sense when:

- Your goal requires planning for a risky and uncertain future. For example, if you have been drinking heavily at a party and are thinking of driving yourself home, it's not a good idea to be optimistic about getting home safely.
- You are trying to encourage other people whose future looks grim. For example, if your child is failing three out of five college courses this semester and is already on academic probation, it is inappropriate to suggest that "everything will be okay". Instead, it is better to realistic and to offer suggestions on how your child can best plan for the future, including a future without college in it.
- Counseling a depressed or troubled person. It is best first to be empathetic rather than suggesting they look on the bright side. For example, heartbroken teenagers need to know that you sympathize with their feelings and that you understand what they are going through before they will be able to listen to your advice.