

Optimism

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As the 1944 song by Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer goes:

"You've got to accentuate the positive
Eliminate the negative
Latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mister in-between."

It continues:

"You've got to spread the joy up to the maximum
Bring gloom down to the minimum
Have faith or pandemonium's
Liable to walk upon the scene."

In the 1980's, research psychologist Martin Seligman says much the same. Optimism - realistic optimism - plays an important role in bringing good things into a person's life in areas ranging from health, job and school success and personal relationships. Pessimism tends to create difficulties.

Much of this phenomenon seems to relate the way that individuals handle stress and problems. It is true that some of us have far more problems and far less advantages than others. And yet, some people seem to bounce back from difficulty easier than others.

A lot of that ability involves what researchers call people's "explanatory style" - their response to bad times. Do we blame our problems fully on ourselves, or can we accept that bad luck and factors beyond our control play a part in our difficulties? This doesn't change the reality of our difficulty, of course, but it does make it easier to cope with than if we considered ourselves fully at fault.

In addition, when faced with difficulty, do we withdraw in defeat and helplessness or can we evaluate the situation and take control wherever feasible in order to improve it. Such an ability involves an interesting differentiation: We accept we have made errors or been wrong, but not that we are bad. Furthermore we feel we can change in order to succeed.

The pessimist tends to think that negative things can't change and that, unfortunately, includes his negative attitude. It is important to know that it can. Cognitive methods, visual imagery, emotional expression to a sympathetic person, understanding the influence of the past on one's present all help to avoid negative people and seek out optimists for their inspiration and example, to make time and opportunity for fun in one's life and to seek out professional help if needed.

When it comes down to it, optimism is a wonderful attribute and a form of power, for it facilitates within a person a valuable control of and pleasure in his daily life.

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