

## SEEING BOTH SIDES IS UNREALISTIC OPTIMISM GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH?

### Unrealistic optimism can be good for your health

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Is unrealistic optimism bad for your health? It seems like it should be. After all, if people believe they are relatively invulnerable to disorders ranging from tooth decay to heart disease, logically, shouldn't that interfere with practicing good health behaviors? Ample evidence suggests that many people are indeed unrealistically optimistic about their health. But, if anything, unrealistic optimism may be good for your health.

Consider the practice of health habits, such as wearing a seat belt, getting exercise, and avoiding harmful substances such as tobacco and alcohol. Rather than undermining such habits, as some have assumed, unrealistic optimism may actually lead people to practice better health habits. Aspinwall and Brunhart (1996) found that people with optimistic expectations about their health actually pay *more* attention to personally relevant risk-related information than pessimistic people, apparently so that they can take preventive action to offset those risks. A study of elderly Dutch men, for example, found that those who were optimistic were more likely to get exercise, be non-smokers, and have a better diet (Giltay, Geleijnse, Zitman, Buijsse, Kromhout, 2007).

Perhaps the most persuasive evidence for beneficial health effects of unrealistic optimism has come from studies of people facing major health risks. In one study of men diagnosed with AIDS, maintaining an unrealistically optimistic outlook, as opposed to a realistic one, was associated with a significantly increased length of life (Reed, Kemeny, Taylor, Wang, and Visscher, 1994; see also Ironson et al., 2005). A study of ovarian cancer patients on chemotherapy found that optimism protected against psychological distress and led to a better response to treatment in the form of a decrease in cancer antigen 125 (de Moor et al., 2006).

Optimists also seem to recover faster from illnesses. Leedham, Meyerowitz, Muirhead, and Frist (1995) found that optimistic expectations among heart transplant patients were associated with better mood, quality of life, and adjustment to illness. Similar findings are reported by Scheier and his associates (Scheier et al., 1989) in their study of people adjusting to coronary artery bypass surgery. What accounts for findings like these?

Optimism is tied to good coping strategies, as well as to good health habits. Optimists are active copers who try to solve problems rather than avoid them (Nes & Segerstrom, 2006). Optimistic people are also more interpersonally successful, and so they may do a better job of attracting social support. Social support is known to reduce the likelihood of illness and promote

recovery, and so, optimistic people may recruit this special resource for dealing with stress and with illness (Taylor, 2007).

Scientists are also realizing that optimism may create or be associated with a bodily state conducive to health as well as to rapid recovery from illness. Suzanne Segerstrom and her associates (Segerstrom, Taylor, Kemeny, & Fahey, 1998) studied a group of law students under intense academic stress during the first semester of law school. They found that the optimistic law students showed an immunological profile suggestive of greater resistance to illness and infection. Ten years on, the optimistic attorneys were making more money and had better mental and physical health than the less optimistic ones (Segerstrom, 2007).

Optimism may forestall health risks due to major stressors as well. That is, when people are going through intensely stressful times, they are often especially vulnerable to illness. But this seems to be less true of optimists. Kivimäki and colleagues (2005) found that optimists who experienced a death or severe illness in their family were less likely to develop health problems and were faster to recover from illness when they did get sick than were pessimists who experienced these same major stressors.

Why do some people think that optimism is bad for your health? Some researchers have indicted unrealistic optimism as a culprit that promotes health risk without the evidence. For example, although smokers seemingly underestimate their risk for lung cancer, there is no evidence that their unrealistic optimism led them to smoke or justifies their continued smoking. Indeed, smokers are well aware that they are more vulnerable to lung disorders than are nonsmokers.

Does this mean that unrealistic optimism is always beneficial for your health or is beneficial to all people? Most optimists are 'constructive optimists' who take active efforts to protect their health and safety (Epstein & Meier, 1989). But some optimists are 'naïve optimists' who cling to the belief that everything will turn out all right without any active efforts on their part. For example, among some frightened medical patients, such as cardiac patients, optimism may act to blunt the awareness of the threat to their health and lead to defensive coping, rather than the efficacious problem-focused coping with which optimism is usually tied (Bedi & Brown, 2005). If optimists are ever at risk for poorer health habits, it may be this group of avoidant copers.

Before you write off unrealistic optimism as a state that blinds people to the realistic risks we all face, look at its benefits. It keeps people happier, healthier, and more likely to recover from illness.



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