

## Cultivating the Habit of Optimism

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Given today's turbulent economy, it takes courage to be optimistic. Bombarded daily with negative news and tales of woe from friends and colleagues, chiropractors across the country are concerned about the future of their practices and their personal financial security. With no immediate solution to the complex problems at hand, the tendency for many is to join the gloomy conversation, argue about how we got here, focus on the negative, and agonize over how bad things might get before conditions improve. Let me offer an alternative approach: Cultivate the habit of optimism as a way to stay strong and confident during challenging times.

There are compelling reasons to work toward maintaining a positive outlook, even when faced with challenges. *The Handbook of Positive Psychology* quotes Charles Carver and Michael Scheier as follows: "Optimists are less distressed when times are tough, cope in ways that foster better outcomes, and are better at taking the steps necessary to ensure that their futures continue to be bright." Optimism is beneficial in that it not only enhances your current sense of well-being, but this positive habit also helps you stay interested in working on - and in - your practice and toward business success, regardless of external economic conditions.

When you are optimistic you are more likely to feel motivated to accomplish what you say is important to you. You have a stake in your future and work more diligently toward goals such as practice marketing, in part because the activity itself serves the purpose of helping you stay energized and engaged. For example, taking action steps to implement a well-thought-out marketing plan becomes the fuel you need to stay motivated to take the next step, and the next one, and the one after that.

Chronic pessimism, on the other hand, results in low energy and lack of motivation. Pessimists may fail to break out of their negativity rut because, at some level, it feels safe. If you never expect anything good to happen, you'll never face disappointment. Another untoward side effect of pessimism is that even when you try to put on a positive face, your inner pessimist is obvious to those around you, including patients, staff, family and friends.

### What's Your Tendency?

Although most of us tend to lean one way or the other, it's the rare individual who is optimistic or pessimistic 100 percent of the time. How we interpret events that occur in our lives and anticipate the future can shift based on recent experiences or our current emotional state. We may be optimistic about certain aspects of our lives (my primary relationship is good and will remain so) and pessimistic in other areas (I'm worried about the economy and my financial future). Our ability to see the glass half-full or half-empty may be even be influenced by who we've been in close contact with recently. Regardless of your tendency, if your desire is to develop and sustain a positive outlook, it's helpful to recognize when you are under the sway of pessimistic thinking, feeling and self-talk. Only then will you be able to self-correct and take steps to cultivate the habit of optimism.

Optimists explain positive events as having happened because of an enduring or stable personal trait. When they succeed, they believe that success is a result of hard work or good decision-making. Optimists also tend to think that because they've been successful, they will continue to be successful and that good things will happen in the future. When optimists experience negative events, they write it off as a minor setback, an isolated occurrence or simply the result of a bad day.

Pessimists, quite simply, assume the worst. They see any good fortune that befalls them as temporary, assume they "got lucky," and distrust they will have similar successes in the future. When pessimists have a negative experience (or worse, a series of setbacks), they make sweeping generalizations that this is the "new normal" and that things will never improve.

Consider the following events related to practice growth and profitability; think about what your typical response would be. This exercise will help you identify your usual tendency and understand the difference between pessimistic and optimistic interpretations.

Event #1: Janet, the best office manager you've ever had, has landed another job that offers more responsibility and better pay. *Pessimist's response:* I'll never find anyone as good as Janet. And even if I did, it would take forever to train someone new. *Optimist's response:* Janet was a great manager and helped me develop my practice to where it is today. Now I have an opportunity to bring in someone with fresh ideas about how to take the practice to the next level. I feel good that Janet learned enough under my leadership to take on a bigger job, and I'll support my next manager to develop and excel.

Event #2: New patient volume has dropped off recently. *Pessimist's response:* It's this horrible economy. People are losing their jobs. Chiropractic care is the last thing anyone will spend money on. I imagine many of my wellness patients will drop out now, too. *Optimist's response:* The new marketing ideas I'm implementing are perfect for helping potential new patients see the value of staying healthy, especially now, when they may be stressed because of the economy. I'll work toward helping patients see that taking care of themselves during challenging times is not a luxury, but a necessity.

Event #3: Collections are down. *Pessimist's response:* Collections are going to be down no matter what I do. From what I hear, everyone is having the same problem. *Optimist's response:* It's time to investigate potential new revenue streams and also explore how to bill for my services for maximum reimbursement. My office manager mentioned a billing and collections workshop for the staff that sounds good. I may even attend it with them.

Event #4: Your "tried and true" marketing efforts are not working as well as they once did. *Pessimist's response:* I can't afford new marketing this year. Anyway, it doesn't seem to matter what I do. Marketing doesn't work for me. Plus, I'm a good clinician and shouldn't have to be marketing at this stage in my career. *Optimist's response:* I've marketed successfully in the past and I am willing to adjust my message if that's what's needed. It's probably time to find out more about new media and social networking to promote my business. I'll take a look at my schedule and budget this weekend, and decide how to approach marketing for the rest of this year.

### Five Ways to Cultivate Optimism

Where did you see yourself in the examples above? Mostly optimistic or mostly pessimistic? Somewhere in between? Regardless of where you are along the continuum, there are steps you can take to further develop the habit of optimism. Here are five:

1. *Observe your thoughts and language.* The first step in changing a behavior or habit is to become aware of it. Starting today, make a concerted effort to notice when your mind wanders to the dark corners of pessimism and negativity. Listen to your own language and take note of when you fall into conversations that are negative (complaining, bemoaning, commiserating and kvetching). Don't beat yourself up when you notice pessimistic thinking or speaking; simply observe it.
2. *Pay attention to what's going right.* Several recent national polls suggest people are mostly pessimistic about the overall economy. But when asked about their own situation, the majority of people polled were more positive. "Oh, yes, the economy is just terrible . . . people are suffering. Oh, me? Well, I'm OK," was the message. Regularly assess your own situation as objectively as possible to avoid slipping into the herd mentality that everything and everyone is in a downward spiral. Keep in mind, too, that during a recession, health care is a sector that stays relatively strong. Be grateful for the fact that you can still do the work you love and make a good living even in a shaky economy.
3. *Focus on what you can control.* You have no power over what the Federal Reserve chairman does, how the stock market performs or what the unemployment rate is. Stay informed about what's going on in the world economically, but don't waste a moment worrying about issues over which you have no control. Instead, focus on your own goals and objectives.
4. *Associate with positive people.* Think about who is in your social circle and business network. Who are the most upbeat, optimistic people you know within those two groups? Have coffee or lunch with at least one of them this week, another one next week, and so on.
5. *Be prudent, but not parsimonious.* Plan, budget, save, and make contingency plans for financial emergencies, but avoid becoming Scrooge-like. If you operate from fear and tighten your money belt so much that you can't breathe (or enjoy life), resentment and despair may soon set in. Now is not the time to stop spending on goods and services that will help grow your practice. Assume (just not blindly) that your financial future is secure, make prudent decisions and stay in a position to take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

## Success Begets Success

If you were in the habit of eating a healthy diet and one day, in a rush, had a cheap burger and a diet soda at the corner fast-food joint, chances are good that the "meal" wouldn't taste good or be satisfying. It might even make you feel a little sick. The same thing happens when you cultivate the habit of optimism. Once it becomes the norm, if you slip back into pessimistic thinking, it won't feel good and you'll notice.

Just as success begets more success, an optimistic stance grows into greater levels of optimism - and greater success. Pay attention to your thoughts and language. Associate with positive thinkers. Be courageously optimistic. Stand up for yourself and your convictions. Create your own positive future, regardless of what the nightly news has to say. Hold firm to your belief that by providing high-quality care and making a positive contribution to patients, you will have a successful practice this year, next year and beyond. And then do everything you can to ensure that your belief is also your reality.

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