

The [Professional Learning Hub](#), Griffith University, is proud to present Positive on Purpose, a podcast series by Mia O'Brien

## Episode 8 – Optimism



I'm Mia O'Brien from the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University, and welcome to my podcast: Positive on purpose – no magical thinking required.

This podcast completes the first series of Positive on Purpose podcasts, and unpacks a concept that plays an important role in each of the themes covered to date, but is itself, vital to positivity. That concept is 'optimism'....

In the first Positive on Purpose podcast we explored the difference between 'happiness' and 'positivity' - where 'happiness' refers to a feeling or mood that can pass quickly, whereas 'positivity' refers to a state of mind and world view associated with an optimistic outlook, optimal functioning and sustained subjective well-being.

Genuine positivity refers to qualities and conditions that are immensely beneficial to our health and wellbeing, and are lastingly impactful on our life experience. Central to positivity is the concept of optimism.

The Cambridge dictionary defines optimism as: *the quality of being full of hope and emphasising the good parts of a situation; or the belief that something good will happen.*

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines optimism as: *an inclination to put the most favourable construction upon actions and events; or to anticipate the best outcome.*

The Oxford dictionary describes optimism as *hopefulness and confidence about the future or success of something.*

Optimism describes a psychological state or outlook that is characterised by hopefulness and a tendency towards the positive. The word 'optimism' is related to 'optimum' meaning 'best' – so to say that a person is optimistic is to infer that person is predisposed to seeing the world, events and experiences through a hopeful, 'best case scenario' frame of mind.

Now at this point we need to distinguish this brand of optimism from what scientists might call 'irrational optimism' - which is the unfounded belief that everything will be fine or come out for the best; or the quite pervasive belief that whatever happens was 'meant to be' and no matter what, everything will be okay. This kind of irrational optimism is characterised by a rose-coloured glasses view that with some magical thinking, crossed fingers and lots of 'hope for the bests' things will work out in the end. Irrational optimism can be annoying at best, and dangerous at worst, particularly if applied to situations that would ordinarily require some sensible thinking, such as not studying for an exam or choosing not to prepare for an important presentation because you're thinking 'what will be will be' so you'll just wing it. That's just irrational.

Even uttering the phrase: 'I hope everything works out for the best' may appear positive, but it leaves out two very important aspects of optimism – agency and reality. Agency refers to things that are within our control, the capacity we have as individuals to choose an action, thought or behaviour at will. And reality refers to factors that exist in our lives, that we have or can find evidence of.

**Winston Churchill's famous description of optimism illustrates the role of agency and reality when he says: "*A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; and an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty*"**

I love this description because it captures those important qualities. That is, that optimism is an intentional commitment to finding and developing a beneficial outcome, based on the evidence, in the face of difficulty.

So in this podcast, when we refer to optimism, we mean an intentional frame of mind that values the role that our thoughts and actions can play in making the most of a situation, or in seeing our way through difficult situations with positive, potentially beneficial outcomes in mind.

This version of optimism – as a regularly practiced, default perspective on life – has enormous benefits.

Optimists: are generally much happier with life, and optimism (as a frame of mind) is more conducive to coping effectively with difficulty or change, problem solving, humour, decision-making, planning, creative and innovative thinking, and learning new things.

Optimists experience less distress than pessimists when life gets difficult, and they suffer much less anxiety and stress. Optimists also adapt better to change and negative events; and when situations escalate beyond the norm, optimists have greater coping advantages over pessimists. This last point makes optimism essential to leadership and most professional contexts – it takes optimism to lead others and persuade them to have confidence in your ideas, to exert continuous effort over time, to work through the details of difficult problems and to cultivate generative thinking. Overall, optimists tend to report more health promoting behaviours and more positive, satisfying relationships.

Most importantly, optimism is foundational to positivity; so if you're naturally inclined to optimism, then you're already well your way; but if you're more yin than yang, or tend to the negative, pessimistic side of things, don't despair; developing healthy optimism can be learned.

Just before Martin Seligman's declared positive psychology to be a legitimate field of research within social psychology, he published the very well received book *Learned Optimism*, in 1991. In that research Seligman showed how optimism is a strategy or way of thinking that we can all adopt to our benefit. One key difference between optimists and others was what he called 'explanatory style' –or the way in which people explain a situation – its causes and influences.

People who use a pessimistic explanatory style tend to appraise bad events in terms of personal failure making global, sweeping statements about things that they have very little or no control over. For example: *because of the covid19 pandemic life as we know it has changed, most of the skills I've used to build my career to date are no longer valid in the world, my career is over and I'll never find work in this field again.*

People who use an optimistic explanatory style prioritise their self-esteem, acknowledge their agency (that is, the options they have for choice and action), avoid global 'all or nothing' statements, and explain negative events by attributing cause very carefully, emphasising the kind of 'opportunity within difficulty' that Churchill spoke of. For example: *the covid19 pandemic has been devastating but really required us to innovate; a lot of the skills that were previously important to my work are now outdated, so this means I'll need to build new skills as my career starts to take a different direction.*

You might recognise the characteristics of these explanatory style examples, as Seligman's research on learned optimism underpins the themes and examples I outlined in the podcasts titled 'Stories we tell ourselves'. You'll remember that the way in which we respond to stressful situations, and tell stories about those experiences in life are vital to positivity. Equally so, listening carefully to the 'stories we tell ourselves' or *our explanatory style* plays an important role in building optimism and in turn, for practicing positivity.

Now, it takes attention, mindfulness and some careful unpacking and reframing to turn a pessimistic view into an optimistic perspective, but remembering Churchill's maxim can be an effective reminder of what this takes:

***"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; and an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty" ....***

But wait, earlier in this podcast we referred to optimism as an intentional frame of mind that values the role that our thoughts **and actions** can play in making the most out of any situation.

An optimistic explanatory style takes care of the 'thoughts' part of optimism... but the action part needs an additional step. That step leads us to Fredrickson's broaden and build theory. I've referred to Fredrickson's work previously and often, because it is such a powerful way to conceptualise the agency and commitment to action that living a positive life requires.

Optimism is as much about acknowledging the potential of alternative thinking and action as it is about taking a hopeful view of the future. And that's what makes the broaden and build theory so helpful. You'll remember that Fredrickson studied the mindsets of people who flourish compared to people who flounder. Both kinds of people face challenge; the key difference being that flounders respond to challenge by withdrawing their reserves and narrowing down their focus; whereas flourishers actively broadened their perspective and build their resources. This 'broaden and build' response to difficult times is a powerful complement to an optimistic disposition.

Think about this for a moment – having faced a quite difficult and potentially life changing experience, such as the covid19 pandemic, an optimist might say that the worst is over now, that there was opportunity within the hardship to reconnect with what was really important, to simplify life, to pause and take a breath, etc. However if that challenging experience impacted you directly in an irreversible way, then an optimistic outlook will only get you part of the way to positivity.

Inherent within optimism is the need to broaden our perspectives and be intentional about building an array of resources that help us towards a beneficial outcome. Fredrickson's research showed that negative emotions and pessimistic thinking tended to narrow down and drastically reduce our 'thought-action repertoires' to automatic fight, flight or freeze type responses.

In contrast, staying positive and optimistic opens up those 'thought-action repertoires' – this has a 'broadening' effect that means there are more options available to us to respond; we're physiologically and psychologically more able to access our higher order thinking and executive function, and in turn more cognitively capable of generating creative, flexible, less-predictable ways of thinking and acting. These are all advantages in life, and behind the 'coping advantage' that optimists enjoy during times of stress. From this vantage point, we are also more able to build important social, physical, intellectual and psychological resources (including resilience, agility, and persistence, to name a few).

In this way, positivity relies on optimism and a 'broaden and build' response to challenge or change. As we make that commitment to building an optimistic perspective, we lean in to strategies that help us - and that includes cultivating attention, fostering mindfulness, listening carefully to the stories we tell ourselves, creating opportunities for flow, and leading with and building on our strengths. These things together are the conditions that can lead to a positive, flourishing life.

And on that note I'm going to echo Shawn Achor who describes happiness as '*the joy you feel when moving towards your potential*' and I'm going to borrow the caveat he provides, in that the joy you feel may in fact be some of the most difficult, painful or challenging moments of your life (as you work toward your highest aspirations, develop new strengths, and extend and expand your repertoire of positivity practices), but if it takes you towards your potential, and if you lean in with an unwavering commitment to optimism and opportunity - it will be joy and happiness nonetheless.

Join me for series two of the Positive on Purpose podcast, as we continue to explore the research and science behind positive psychology, consider its application to our day to day lives, and build positive and empowering responses to challenging times.

I'm Mia O'Brien and you can contact me on email via: [mia.obrien@griffith.edu.au](mailto:mia.obrien@griffith.edu.au) I look forward to your company in our next episode of Positive on Purpose: no magical thinking required.

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