



A Spoonful of Optimism

Having a glass-half-full mentality can take practice, but it can improve your health across the board

By Karen Marley

Silver linings can be more than poetic fodder and pretty pictures. Numerous studies show that people who maintain an optimistic outlook, even when life clouds up with adversity, tend to enjoy a higher quality of life than those whose glasses are half-empty.

The correlation between optimism and a better life lies in the former's influence on physical and mental well-being. Armed with the ability to adapt to life's challenges, problem-solve and effectively manage negative information, one can be better prepared for resilience during challenging times.

Mental Muscles

Adversity is part of life's daily rhythm. Some obstacles are bigger than others — coping with a pandemic versus an overcooked turkey, for instance — but what causes one person turn to self-destructive behaviors while another emerges with a new level of strength and resolve is related to overall health.

"In general, emotional and mental health is extremely important to overall health — an individual's physical, mental, and social well-being," says Dr. Keith King, director of the Center for Prevention Science and professor of health promotion and education at the University of Cincinnati. "Taking care of the emotional side often gets overlooked and takes a back burner to physical health."

Being proactive is crucial to emotional health and optimism, but that takes effort and prioritizing one's emotional and mental health needs.

"Our society is reactive, and the medical industry practices reactive care," King says.

A preventive approach recognizes that the best time to strengthen emotional and mental muscles is before a problem arises. Without a skill-set that includes resiliency and effective coping strategies, a person is at risk of engaging in unhealthy and even destructive behaviors when faced with life's stressors. King calls this set of skills a "resiliency tool kit."

Tool Time

King identifies the top six resiliency skills that everyone should invest in for better overall health and an optimistic outlook on life.

1. Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the ability for a person to identify how they feel on an on-going daily basis. This ability requires mindfulness: A form of objective, non-judgmental self-awareness.



Keith King, director of the Center for Prevention Science and Professor of Health Promotion and Education at University of Cincinnati, helps people develop resiliency skills so they can better handle adversity.



“The importance of mindfulness cannot be overstated,” King says.

Improving mindfulness requires developing the discipline and ability to focus on one thing with intention. To practice it, King recommends starting with breathing exercises. This is possible for everyone, and can be done anywhere and at almost any time.

“Breathing promotes positive emotional health,” King explains. “It helps you prioritize and focus your thoughts by gaining mindfulness on the specific task. It also taps into the release of neurotransmitters that you want released — like dopamine — which is associated with positive, mental health.”

2. Social Connections

Children who are positively connected to families and schools are at less risk to engage in negative behaviors, and the same holds true for adults. Positive social connections can help offset negative feelings triggered by adversity. Like self-awareness, strengthening social connections requires practice. This is accomplished by talking to other individuals. If that is difficult, King recommends starting with small-talk skills by using open-ended questions and asking people about themselves.

3. Routine Movement

Daily schedules help a person manage everyday tasks and it should include some form of physical activity. Physical activity does not have to be a specific workout. Movement in any form is

the goal. Eating healthy is also a critical component of nurturing an active lifestyle filled with movement.

4. Sleep on It

Quality rest has natural restorative powers, and is connected to myriad physical and mental health benefits including improved memory, better exercise performance, higher energy levels, a stronger immune system, better heart health and more positive mood.

5. Gratitude

When faced with adversity, it's common for a person to focus on the negative. One way to counteract this is to focus on the positive, and research says expressing gratitude is one way to do it. King says the more specific a person is with identifying the source of gratitude, the more meaningful it will feel.

6. Experience Nature

Numerous studies have linked exposure to nature with powerful physical and mental health benefits including reduced inflammation and reduced stress, and strengthened immunity; not to mention boosts in creativity, productivity and optimism. So get out and experience the wild. Even a picturesque view through a window can be helpful.

Life is Life

Optimism is not about denying painful feelings that a hardship can trigger, but rather avoiding the trap of spiraling downward into negativity.

“Individuals should feel all emotions — hurt, grief, anger, happiness, sadness, elation, contentment, etc.,” King says. “The issue is when an individual gets stuck in a negative feeling, cannot escape it and it snowballs.”

Feelings are tenuous and life moves quickly. Embracing all of life's flavors with an ability to look forward with positivity will ultimately help ensure the journey is a delicious one.