
Get Happy: The Real Power of Positive Thinking

If you want to live a longer life, start with positive thinking. Learning how to be an optimist can make your heart and your mind healthier.

By [Chris Iliades, MD](#)

Medically reviewed by [Pat F. Bass III, MD, MPH](#)

Need proof that optimism is healthy?

The evidence can be found in a couple of recent studies. One evaluated 309 people who were having heart surgery and found that people with **a positive outlook** were 50 percent less likely to return to the hospital in the six months following surgery. Another, from the Women's Health Initiative, followed 97,000 post-menopausal women for more than eight years and found that those who scored highest in optimism had a significantly lower chance of developing heart disease.

How Optimism Contributes to Good Health

Just as positive thinking and good emotional health contribute to wellness, negative thinking can have adverse effects on health, such as weakening **your immune system** and preventing you from doing the things you need to do to take good care of yourself.

Eva Ritvo, MD, vice chair of the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine in Florida and co-author of *The Beauty Prescription*, says that positive thinking improves your mental health and reduces stress. "When you are optimistic, people are attracted to you. This leads to healthier relationships, more success, and decreased emotional stress. And of course, we know that emotional stress can lead to physical illness," says Dr. Ritvo.

"Positive thinking reduces inflammation, which is a byproduct of stress. It is important to reduce inflammation because it stands at the root cause of disease and plays havoc with your thinking," adds Debbie Mandel, MA, author of *Addicted to Stress* and a nationally recognized stress management expert.

Positive Thinking: Tips for Maintaining Optimism

"To maintain positive thinking you need to pay attention to basic needs such as getting enough rest, **proper nutrition**, exercise, stress reduction, and health care. It means keeping your life in balance," advises Ritvo. Here are some tips for keeping a positive outlook:

Let it out. Keeping feelings of sadness, anger, or guilt bottled up inside is unhealthy and

can undermine positive thinking. Talk to a friend or loved one. Get your feelings out in the open where you can deal with them.

Replace negative thinking with positive thinking. "People who are optimistic are able to reframe negatives into positives. Practicing this kind of positive spin will eventually make it automatic. Since there are no absolute truths, consider your life story. Do you want it to be a positive one or a tragic one?" asks Mandel.

Learn to deal with stress. Some stress is inevitable. Learn to handle it in a positive way. "Exercise sheds stress, releases endorphins, helps you focus, creates personal empowerment, and boosts the immune system," advises Mandel. Having a good social support system, accepting change, and keeping life in perspective are other ways people can deal with stress and maintain positive thinking.

Be a survivor. Life is both magic and tragic. We all have to face loss, failure, and disappointment sometimes. People who are optimistic find a way to recover. They develop resilience. "Life is a series of recoveries. When you understand this premise, you believe that you will get through your obstacles and emerge stronger with experience and empowerment to navigate the next challenge," says Mandel.

Create time for fun. Positive thinking and joy go together. "Instead of an endless to-do list, pursue a creative hobby to fill any loss or grief you are experiencing. Activate your sense of fun. Laughter is your inner treadmill and it breaks negativity instantly," urges Mandel.

Take good care of yourself. People who are optimistic don't neglect their physical health. "Take responsibility for your health care. Find a good health care provider that you see regularly, trust, and can work with. Keep up with the latest health information and make sure you are current on your preventive screenings and vaccinations," advises Ritvo.

Positive thinking and optimism really do contribute to **a longer, healthier life**. Avoid the false sense of optimism offered by drugs and alcohol. These solutions to stress only cause more problems in the long run. A recently released study followed over 6,000 students who attended the University of North Carolina in the 1960s. Of the 476 students who died during the next 40 years, those students who scored lowest in optimism had a 42 percent higher rate of death than those who were the most optimistic.

Positive thinking provides its own rewards, so take responsibility for your thoughts. As the great William Shakespeare once wrote, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

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