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I cover how people & organizations work, and how they can work better.

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Want A Better Life? Be An Optimist - With a Twist

Shortly after my first book came out, I was thrilled to hear that it was going to be featured in the Harvard [Business Review](#). Happily, the [review](#) was largely positive. But one thing struck me: the reviewer characterized me as a “relentless optimist” – and I’m pretty sure he didn’t mean it as a compliment. I’ve noticed, over the years, that many people who consider themselves sophisticated, worldly and clever tend to view optimism as a quaint and outmoded attitude. *The world is awful, they say, and getting worse* - implying that optimists are simply those naifs who don’t know any better.

But I am, indeed, a relentless optimist. Certainly I’ve gotten more accurate in my optimism over time: if something or someone consistently fails to fulfill my hopeful expectations, I’m much better about acknowledging that and re-setting my bar accordingly. However, in any new situation, I am much more likely than not to believe in the possibility of a positive outcome. That’s the heart of optimism, and I’ve taken a lot of good-natured (and not so good-natured) ribbing for it over the years.

And now it seems that my belief in the appropriateness of optimism (my optimism about optimism, if you will) is justified: it turns out that optimists not only stay healthier and live longer, but that being optimistic about a situation is more likely to result in a positive outcome. Even more interesting, research seems to indicate that we’re hard-wired for optimism – that an optimistic outlook is, in fact, an important survival mechanism.

I’ve just read a blog post by [Shane Parrish](#) at Farnam Street, about a book called [The Optimism Bias](#), in which the author, Tali Sharot, cites research that shows that optimism is more than just a pleasant choice – she’s found that human beings are ‘wired for hope.’ Believing in the possibility of a positive future is a long-standing coping mechanism that has always motivated us humans to pursue success even when the odds are stacked against us. Sharot contends that, while optimism can sometimes be misplaced, for the most part, being optimistic is a useful quality, especially when it comes to health and happiness:

“ Some people believe the secret to happiness is low expectations. If we don’t expect greatness, or to find love or maintain health or achieve success, we will never be disappointed. If we are never disappointed when things don’t work out and are pleasantly surprised when things go well, we will be happy. It’s a good theory – but it’s wrong.

Research shows that whatever the outcome...people with high expectations tend to feel better. Hope keeps our minds at ease, lowers stress, and improves physical health. This is probably the most surprising benefit of optimism. All else being equal, optimists are healthier and live longer.... A study of cancer patients revealed that pessimistic patients... were more likely to die within eight months than non-pessimistic patients of the same initial health, status, and age.

There is also quite a bit of research that shows that higher levels of optimism lead to more objective success, as well – in terms of money earned, jobs attained, and successful relationships, among other things. However, there's a particular **kind** of optimism that tends to result in more success as well as more health and happiness.

Remember when I noted earlier that I've gotten more realistic in my optimism over the years? It turns out that this balance of optimism and realism is the key to success. [Research](#) done by Sophia Chou at Taiwan National University shows that *realistic optimists*, a phrase coined by Chou, combine the optimist's hopefulness about the future with an accurate assessment of current reality. She contrasted this with what she calls "idealistic optimists" – those who simply put a positive spin on everything, without trying to do a balanced assessment of any kind.

Realistic optimists see things as they actually are, bringing a clear-eyed and objective perspective to any situation. Their optimism comes into play in their focus on *how to deal* with the situation at hand: they believe that they have more control and more choices about how to deal with what they encounter than either the pessimists or the idealistic optimists.

In other words, the most useful sort of optimism sounds something like this: *I know there will be challenges and obstacles ahead, but I feel confident that I/we will be able to figure out how to achieve our goals within those constraints, and deal with whatever other setbacks arise.*

My observations completely align with Chou's research: the happiest and most successful people I know have just that kind of balanced mindset. I invite you to experiment with it yourself. Next time you're facing a major roadblock in your life, or are tasked with something that feels overwhelming, try shifting your own mindset into this attitude of 'realistic optimism' and see what happens. You might find yourself in a better place – on every level – than you could have imagined.

Check out [Erika Andersen](#)'s newest book, [Leading So People Will Follow](#), and discover how to be a [followable leader](#). Booklist called it "a book to read more than once and to consult many times."

Want to know what Erika and her colleagues at Proteus do? Find out [here](#).

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