



[COMMUNITY](#) // September 9, 2019

# Optimism, Pessimism-What About A Hopeful Pessimist?

*We have become accustomed to only speaking on the positives, the happy, and the good on social media. However, is this approach right? Would we truly benefit from solely practising optimism? Hence, this piece explores the concepts of optimism and pessimism – and how should we be adopting these into our own lives.*

By [Lily Low](#), Blogger, Post-Graduate Student



Image Courtesy of Twitter Account: @BTS\_twt

“Optimists are happy and healthy not because of who they are, but because of how they act.”

—**Suzanne Segerstrom,**  
**positive psychologist**

A [study](#) finds that women who characterize themselves as having higher levels of optimism live 15% longer in comparison to those viewing themselves as otherwise.

I was having a conversation with a cousin brother, discussing about our views and approach towards life. We live in a day and age where the majority of the population are fluent with the use of social media. Often times, successes and happiness are often splashed across the social media accounts of people we

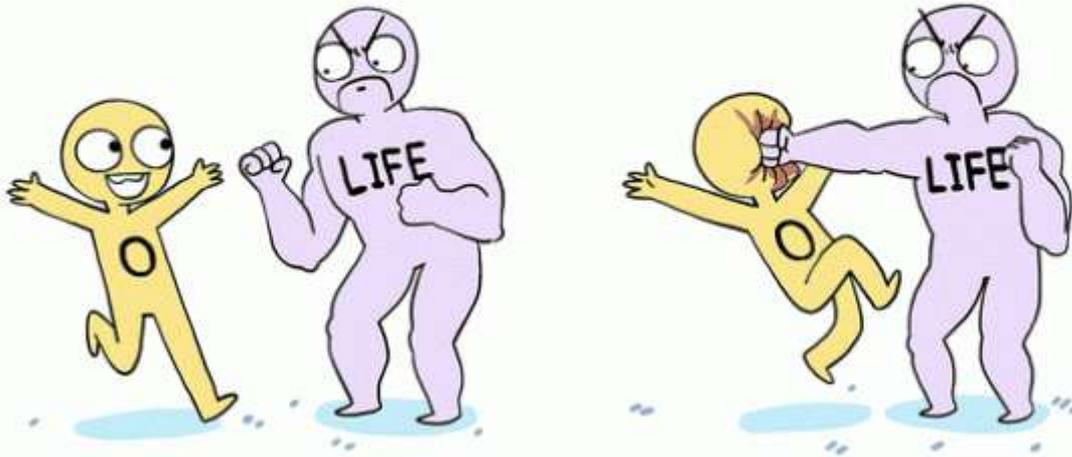
follow. In turn, we become accustomed to only speaking on the positives, the happy, and the good on social media.

As a result, it's easy to forget that social media only offers us merely a glimpse into the life of someone else. Social media displays a controlled and censored view of our lives: we are able to pick what we want others to see.

However, is this culture of only picking out the good moments and discarding the bad, healthy? Hence, this piece will briefly explore the concepts of optimism and pessimism – and how should we adopt these into our own lives.

## **Optimism and Pessimism—What is it really?**

# OPTIMISTIC APPROACH TO LIFE



# PESSIMISTIC APPROACH TO LIFE

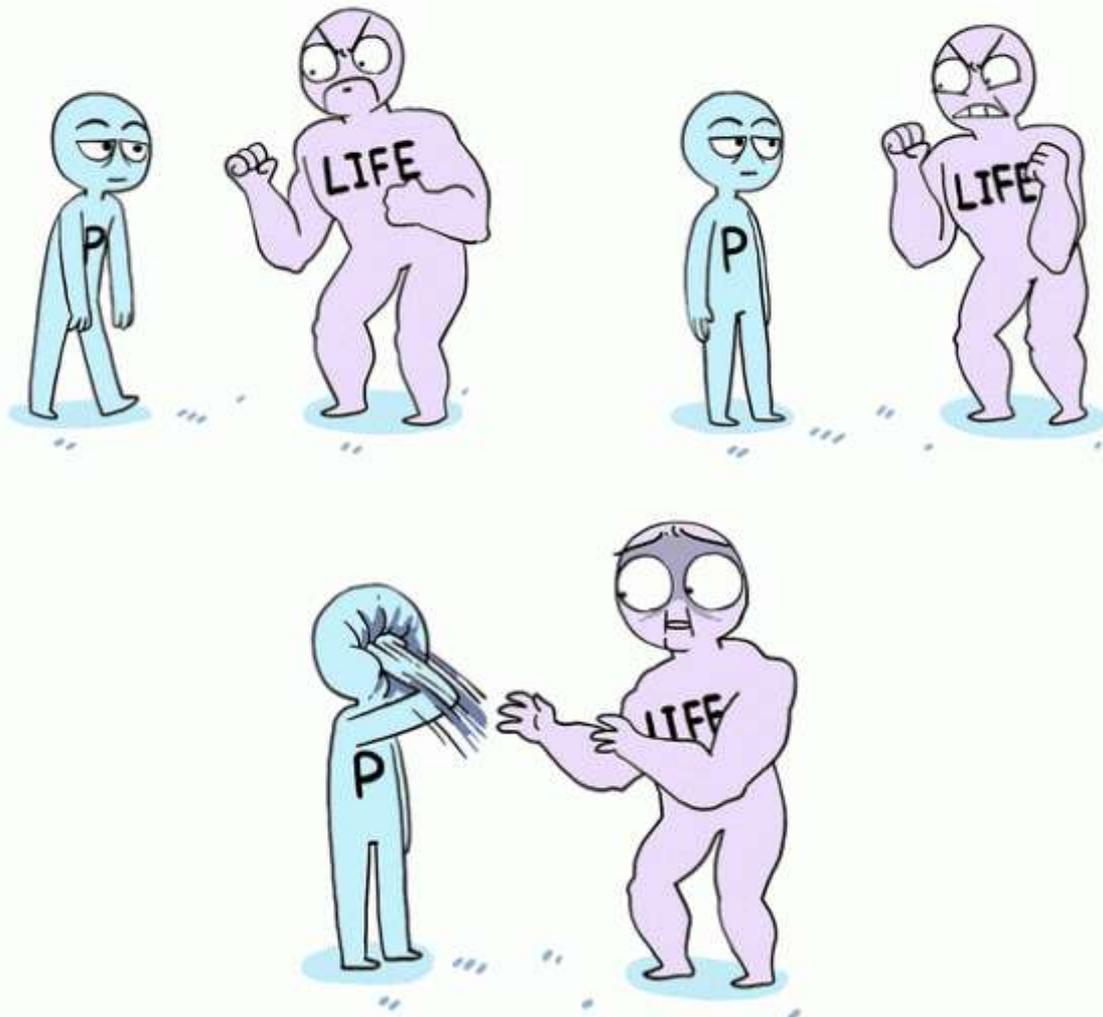


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Our approach to life is dependent on whether we see the world through *rose-coloured glasses* (optimism) or *black glasses* (pessimism, as termed in the Hebrew language).

[Changingminds.org](http://Changingminds.org) briefly describes the different approach an optimist has in comparison to a pessimist. Optimists assume that the best will happen, or that they will be luckier than most people. Meanwhile, pessimists expect the worst. They over-estimate risks, assuming that bad things are more likely to happen.

In his research paper "[The Neural Basis of Optimism and Pessimism](#)", David Hecht discusses the different functions of the brain's hemisphere and its relationship with optimism and pessimism. High self-esteem, a cheerful attitude, as well as being hopeful of the future are associated with physiological activity in the left-hemisphere of the brain. On the other side, the tendency to dwell on the negative, low self-esteem, and a pessimistic view of the future are interlinked with neurophysiological processes in the right-hemisphere of the brain.

## Is one approach better than the other?

The truth is, research is unable to conclusively conclude if one approach truly transcends the other.

A [study](#) published in 2009 found that optimists were more likely to live longer than pessimists. The study reviewed 97,253 women over the age of 50 who participated in the *Women's Health Initiative*. It was discovered during the study that the most optimistic women were 30% less likely to die of heart disease – and 14% less likely than their pessimistic counterparts to die from other causes. However, having an optimistic view may not be the only factor that led to this finding. People who are optimistic may take part in a more active lifestyle: exercising, maintaining strong relationships with others, and having a purpose-driven life.

Studies that investigated the relationship between optimism and health suggest that optimists generally have better [physical health](#), [less](#)

cardiovascular diseases and improved immunological functioning. Additionally, an increased success in academia, work, and sports was also discovered.

According to *Carver and Schier (1999)*, optimists experience less distress dealing with their struggles in comparison to pessimists. It was also subsequently found that optimists reported fewer physical symptoms associated with illness, had better health habits, and possessed better coping strategies when dealing with adversity.

### ***But is there a downside of solely having an optimistic view?***

Neuroscientist Tali Sharot shares on the "optimism bias" concept: our innate human tendency to overestimate the probability of positive events and underestimate the probability of negative ones. By underestimating or overestimating, we create a distorted view of our actual reality. Perhaps we can instead learn to discern and value the advantages that both approaches bring, and apply them based on which would work better in the circumstances that we face.

## **Can pessimism and optimism thrive together?**

Optimism and pessimism are both necessary for our survival and wellness. As in many areas of life, the "golden mean"—*the middle between the two extremes of excess and deficiency*—would be the desirable optimum.

A study conducted by Northwestern University and the University of St. Thomas found that people tend to switch between the two biases, depending on what the situation calls for. The approach that we decide to choose is also dependent on the goal we want to achieve. People who were primarily concerned with *growth* or *advancement* (promotion) tend to lean towards an optimistic view, while those concerned with *safety* and *security* (or preventing negative outcomes) focused more on potential risks and pessimism.

**Each approach should be practiced in moderation.** By having a more positive view, a person may feel more excited and driven about life. If positivity is practiced in excess, optimists may overlook potential negative consequences and may find themselves biting off more than they can chew.

By having a healthy dose of pessimism to balance one's optimism, a contributor on [Psychology Today](#) shares that this balance is able to better one's ability of overcoming psychological obstacles and achieving their goals. [Strategic pessimism](#) can help mitigate anxieties when faced with making decisions. By assessing potential negative outcomes, it becomes easier to plan for contingencies if things do go south.

## So, what should we do?

Ultimately, the best approach is probably one of [cautious optimism with a healthy dose of pessimistic skepticism](#) (or as quipped by my cousin brother, to be a "hopeful pessimist").

It is important to fully understand the weight of any decision in both its negative and positive aspects. While optimism may help you focus on truly great opportunities, it may also blind you to crucial details that could create a negative ripple towards the future. Pessimism may help you avoid disastrous decisions that appear attractive at first glance, but being too focused on the potential negatives can push you away from trying and gaining valuable experience.

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[MENTAL HEALTH](#), [MENTAL WELL BEING](#), [MENTAL WELLNESS](#), [OPTIMISM](#)



Lily Low, **Blogger, Post-Graduate Student**

Lily Low studies Law by day, aspires to be a Writer 24/7. She strongly advocates for Mental Health Awareness. Other than having a passion for people and good music, you may find her occasionally with her nose in a novel. Adores food but is unable to cook to save her life. Shout-out to these platforms who have miraculously allowed her to share her opinion with the public: *RELATE Malaysia*, *Thought Catalog*, *Young Minds UK*, *Medium*, *Law Entry*.

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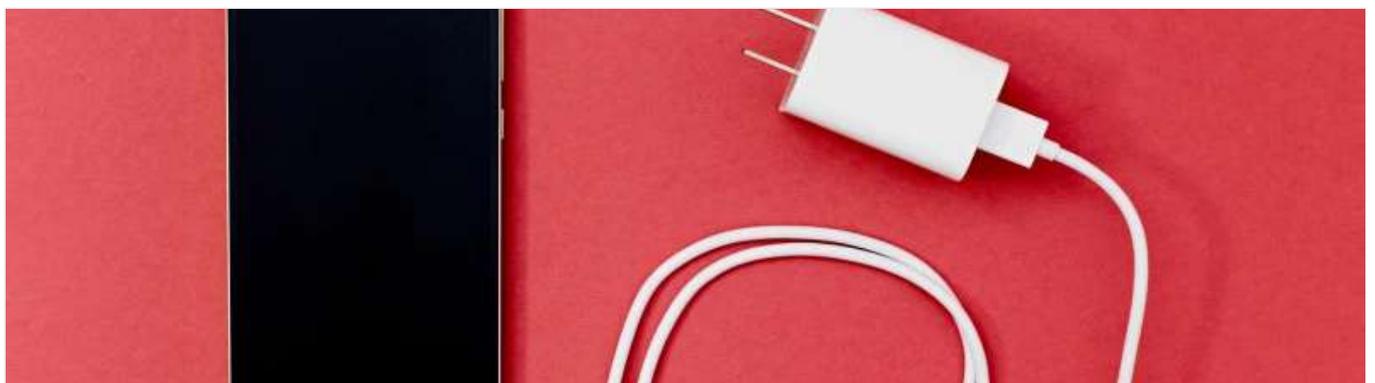
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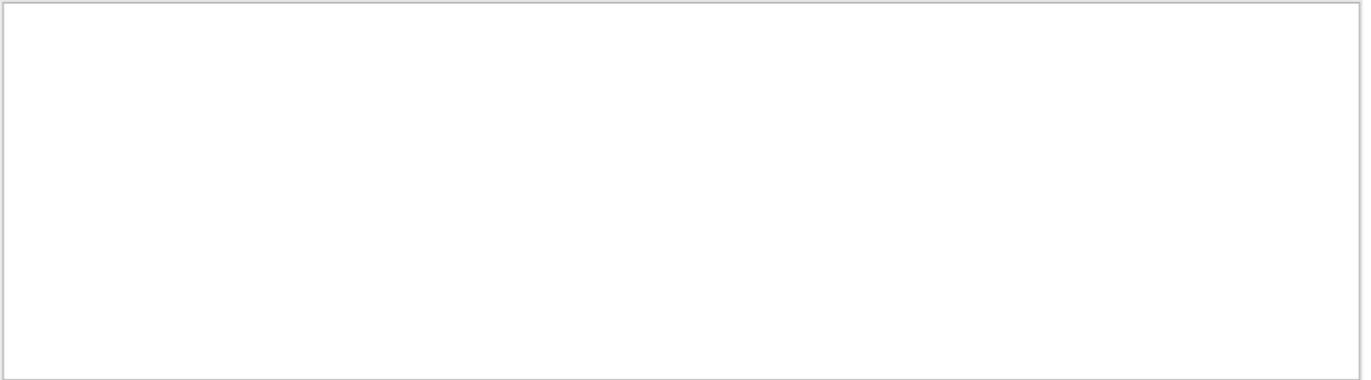
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