

MINDSET

Optimism: The Virtue That Counters Depression and Increases Longevity

And what's the best way to cultivate it—embracing optimism or letting go of pessimism?

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Illustration by Fei Meng.

By Makai Allbert | January 27, 2025 Updated: January 29, 2025

This is part 8 in “Virtue Medicine”

What medicine is safe, effective, free, and requires only a subtle shift in perspective? We welcome you to explore the neglected link between virtue and health—‘Virtue Medicine.’

Ancient Chinese literature tells the story of an old man named Sai Weng, who relied on his horse for his livelihood.

One day, his horse ran away, and the neighbors came to express their sympathy, saying, “That’s a pity.”

Sai Weng calmly remarked, “Maybe.”

Soon after, the horse returned, bringing with it a group of wild horses. The neighbors congratulated him on his good fortune. Sai Weng replied, “Maybe.”

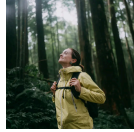
Sai Weng’s son tried to ride one of the wild horses, but he fell off and broke his leg.

Once again, the neighbors gathered around and said, “Well, that’s too bad.”

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Optimism Key to Exceptional Longevity

Sai Weng responded, “Maybe.”

A war broke out not long after, and all the young men in the village were drafted to fight. Because of his injury, Sai Weng’s son was exempt from military service, sparing him from the dangers of war. This [story](#), dating back to the second century B.C., inspired the famous Chinese saying “Sai Weng loses his horse; how could one know it isn’t a blessing?”

A more familiar parallel may be “every cloud has a silver lining” or “every tide has its ebb.” Seeing potential positivity beyond the moment’s challenges embodies the nature of optimism, a virtue that furnishes a growth mindset and nurtures incredible health benefits.

The Benefits of Optimism

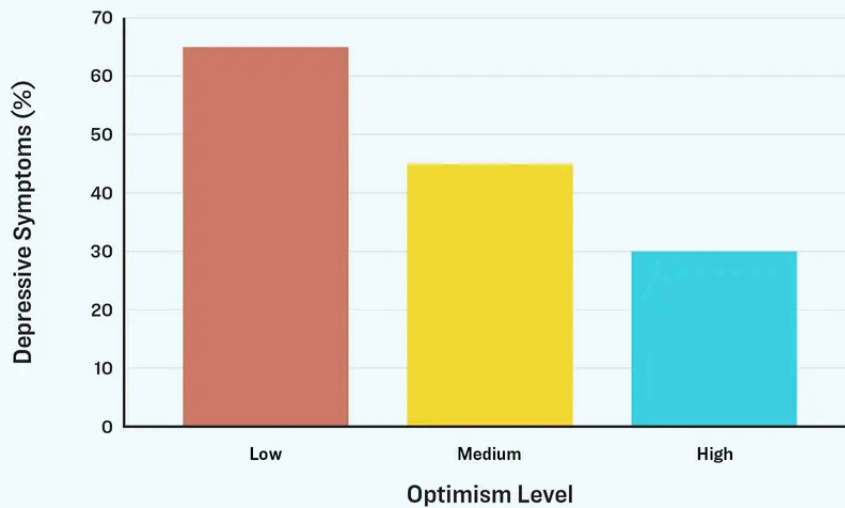
Carsten Wrosch, professor of psychology at Concordia University and personality researcher, told The Epoch Times that optimism is not just a trait but an approach to life.

“It’s basically about whether you expect your life to be good or bad in the future,” he said.

Optimistic individuals are [notably](#) less likely to develop depressive symptoms, even among patients [suffering](#) from chronic illnesses. This protective effect spans all age groups—from [younger](#) to older adults.

For instance, the [Zutphen Elderly Study](#) followed more than 800 men for 15 years, analyzing how lifestyle, diet, and other factors influence diseases and mortality. Notably, the study found that high optimism, compared with low optimism, was associated with a 77 percent lower risk of depressive symptoms.

Higher Optimism Reduces Depression Risk



Source: "Dispositional optimism and the risk of depressive symptoms during 15 years of follow-up," Erik J Giltay et. al, *Journal of Affective Disorders* 2006

EPOCH HEALTH

Illustration by The Epoch Times.

More recent studies have had similar findings. A 2024 [meta-analysis](#) of 18 studies found that participating in optimism training, including mindfulness and gratitude journaling, reduced depression symptoms by about one-third. Psychologically, optimistic individuals have fewer extreme adverse reactions to stressors and thus [recover](#) from depression more rapidly.

As such, optimism can lessen feelings of [hopelessness](#) and [suicidal ideation](#).

Optimism yields another highly desired outcome: longevity. Compared with pessimists, optimist cancer patients are more than [four](#) times more likely to survive a year after diagnosis.

Intuitively, it makes sense; those who expect good things in life have more reason to keep on living. In a seminal [paper](#) published in PNAS analyzing more than 70,000 individuals, researchers found that, compared with the least optimistic individuals, the most optimistic lived up to 15 percent longer, with their chances of achieving "exceptional longevity"—living to 85 or beyond—increasing by up to 70 percent.

To put that into perspective, optimism adds almost as many years to one's life as not having a heart attack or diabetes, according to the researchers.

How to Cultivate Optimism That Heals

What stimulates these profound changes seen in optimistic people? The leading hypothesis is that optimists cope differently with challenges.

Wrosch, who has published extensively on optimism, said that optimists are more likely to confront stressors head-on, invest time and energy in overcoming challenges, and actively seek solutions to problems. They reframe challenges as opportunities—living actively, not passively.

Suzanne Segerstrom, professor and director of the Center for Healthy Aging Research at Oregon State University, told *The Epoch Times* that “people who are more optimistic usually expect better outcomes given the reality of the situation.”

This proactive coping style mitigates the effects of stress, promotes long-term mental health, and fosters a growth mindset.

On the other hand, pessimists use avoidance coping, which means avoiding or denying the stressor—and, in some cases, resorting to drugs or distractions to deal with the stressors.

Fortunately, optimism is a skill that can be practiced. Research outlines several evidence-based methods for cultivating optimism. General strategies include actively [reframing](#) negative thoughts, revisiting past personal achievements to ingrain positive future expectations, and [surrounding](#) oneself with supportive peers.

More structured interventions include engaging in the “best possible self-exercise,” during which you imagine a scenario in which you achieve all your life goals in various domains such as family, work, and health. The more you envision a reality worth working toward, the more you look forward to it—and that’s optimism. According to a large 2019 [meta-analysis](#), this exercise significantly enhances optimism and decreases depressive symptoms.

Further, you can cultivate optimism by writing [gratitude](#) letters or short lists of what you feel grateful for. You can also practice the “three good things [exercise](#),” during which you reflect and write down three positive things that happened during the day and why they occurred. When taken together, these [practices](#) cultivate a habit of focusing on the positive in the present and developing the same positive expectations for the future.

In tandem, mindfulness and meditation encourage present-focused awareness, which [reduces](#) ruminative negative thought patterns and

indirectly fosters optimism.

Be Less Pessimistic

Is it better to think more positively or simply have fewer negative thoughts? In other words, should we focus on being more optimistic or less pessimistic?

A landmark 2021 [meta-analysis](#) uncovered a surprising answer: Pessimism plays a much larger role than optimism in predicting health outcomes, and not just by a small margin. Wrosch explained that the analysis showed that pessimism was about three times more predictive of health consequences. For example, reduced pessimism is linked to [lower](#) inflammation, [better](#) cardiovascular health, and even [higher](#) success rates in fertility treatments compared with increased optimism.

Therefore, Wrosch said, pessimism and optimism should not be seen as opposites of one trait but as two separate personality traits.

Optimism is like stepping on the gas, prompting you to move forward. Pessimism is like having the hand brake on. Even if you hit the gas, the brake drags you down, causing [damage](#) over time and making even basic motion difficult.

Letting go of pessimism is like releasing that brake. Next time you catch yourself spiraling into worst-case scenarios, remember: You don't have to force yourself to think happy thoughts; just easing off the negative ones could be a big step forward.

“Optimism is a feed-forward loop,” Segerstrom said.

Successful individuals are usually more optimistic, which tends to open doors to greater social and financial resources—all reinforcing a positive cycle.

Grace Zhang, an acupuncturist with a bachelor of medicine science from China, told The Epoch Times that “mindset plays a chief role in the healing process.”

She said that from a traditional Chinese medicine perspective, maintaining optimistic emotions helps energy flow more freely and promotes overall health. Conversely, pessimistic emotions cause an energy imbalance, weakening the immune system and leading to illness.

Zhang shared that Sai Weng's story should remind us that when faced with challenges, we should remain tranquil, maintain perspective,

and be open to the possibility that things may turn out for the better.

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Share Your Story: health@epochtimes.nyc

Have you experienced personal transformation or improved health through cultivating virtues? Please share your experience with us.

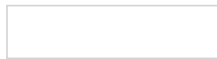
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