

# SOURCE LINES

## *Optimism: Lessons from a donut...*

**T**he way we *perceive* what happens to us affects the length and quality of our lives.

More than a personal belief, this is a scientifically confirmed premise, well documented by Dr. Norman B. Anderson in his book Emotional Longevity: What Really Determines How Long You Live.

Some of the benefits associated with optimism that have been demonstrated consistently in research include:

- lower blood pressure,
- stronger immune systems,
- lower re-hospitalization after by-pass surgery,
- increased life expectancy and quality of life in cancer patients,
- and more positive personal relationships.

For many, looking at the “bright side” seems to come easily; for others it is a challenge at the best of times, let alone in times of trouble.

- Where does optimism come from?
- What constitutes optimism?
- Can one develop a more optimistic attitude?

These questions are addressed below.

From the outset, I want to caution that optimism is not about “looking at life through rose-coloured glasses”. This would only amount to self-deceit. Optimism is first and foremost based on acceptance of reality. In studies on terminal cancer patients, for example, optimists were shown to be more readily accepting of their diagnosis; they could then move on to make decisions that resulted in living longer.

### **Where does optimism/ pessimism come from?**

Optimism is about what meaning we give to the realities in our lives. It involves:

- *How we expect events to turn out in the future, and*
- *How we explain events that have already happened*

These expectations and explanations rest on personal beliefs about ourselves and the world we live in,

The ability to do the above is very tied to the explanations we give to past events. Our routine way of explaining events involves

three aspects that, when woven together, determine the attitudes we develop. These are: how we take *personal* responsibility for what happens (i.e. blame ourselves/blame others); secondly, how we think about the *permanence* of what's happened ( i.e. ability to let bygones be bygones, not be scarred for life) ; finally, the *pervasiveness* of the past events ( i.e. the extent to which we let feelings associated with one event spill over to dominate all other areas, or functions of our life).

### **How can one become a more optimistic person?**

“Success is 99% failure” Soichiro Honda  
“Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration” Thomas Edison

“When having a donut, pessimists focus on the hole while optimists enjoy eating the round dough” Vince Ferrari

If you like donuts, enjoy them, but really if you want to change your life listen to Mr. Honda and Mr. Edison.

I think they would agree with the following guidelines about change (i.e. becoming more optimistic).

Take time to relieve the tension caused by pent-up emotions by choosing among a variety of options for healthy emotional expression.

- Talk about your feelings with a trusted friend, relative, God, counsellor, pet.
- Write about your feelings in a journal, letter, poem, story.
- Express your feelings through art, music, drama, dance.
- Find your way to externalize your feelings.

1. Change is initially uncomfortable. Failure to achieve a new outlook is frequently the result of giving up too early.
2. The consequences of new outlook are not predictable. We often tend to settle for the “devil we know “ rather than expose ourselves to the unknown and uncertainty.
3. To start with, choose an area in your life where trying out a new outlook is more likely to be successful. Practice makes permanent rather than perfect, should be our motto.
4. Persistence can be dull but we need it on the road to success.
5. Beware of familiar self-defeating way of thinking. (Refer to previous Source Line newsletters on “twisted thinking”, — April & May 2003).

For further information, discussion, or concerns related to this newsletter, you can confidentially contact your Employee and Family Assistance Counsellor.

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