

Optimists Live Longer

New research reveals how positive thinking affects the body



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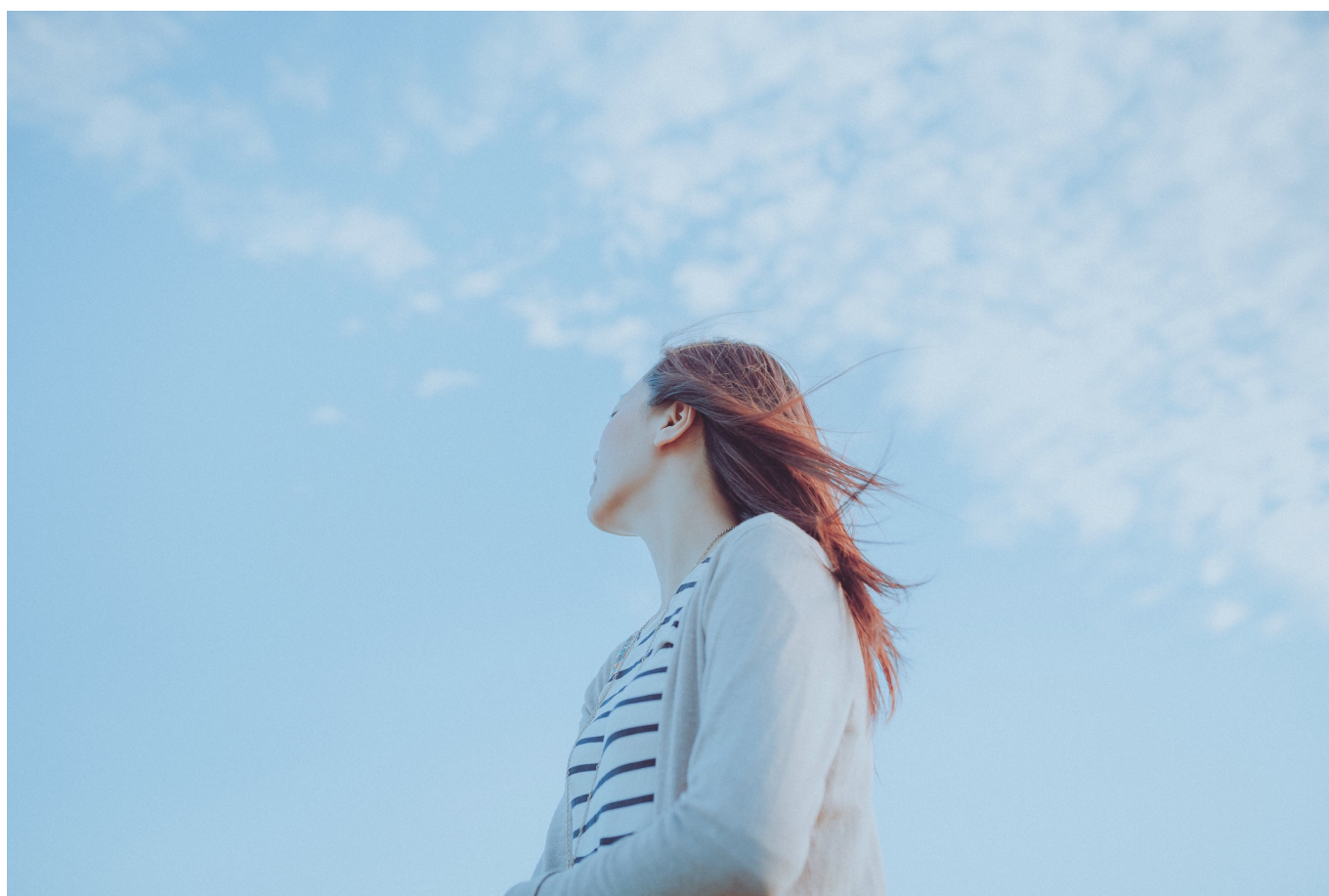


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you look on the bright side, you just might live longer — much longer, according to some upbeat new research. And don't be surprised if that rosy outlook also helps you sleep better at night.

A new study finds women who characterize themselves as having the highest levels of optimism live 15% longer than the least optimistic women and have a 50% greater chance of reaching age 85. The most optimistic men live 11% longer and are 70% more likely to reach 85. (The different results for men and women are not significant, the researchers say.)

The research, reported in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, followed 69,744 women for 10 years and 1,429 men for 30 years. Both groups were surveyed at the outset to assess their level of optimism, as well as other factors that researchers accounted for, including demographics, health conditions, depression, and diet. Optimism is typically defined as a general expectation that good things will happen, or that the future will be favorable because a person can control important outcomes, the researchers explain.

Pessimists might say the study doesn't prove cause-and-effect, and they'd be right, but this is just one of many studies linking optimism to improved health outcomes.

"We know that more optimistic people tend to have lower risks of chronic diseases and premature death," says study team member Lewina Lee, a clinical research psychologist of the VA Boston Healthcare System and assistant professor of psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine. But, Lee adds, researchers don't know exactly how optimism confers benefits, or whether the reverse might be at play, with better health driving optimism.

One key seems to involve the body's stress response. Chronic stress can lead to inflammation which can cause many diseases, studies have shown. Lee and others say optimism likely reduces stress, whereas pessimism causes chronic stress that could foster this path to poor health.

Sounder sleep, better heart health

Compared to pessimists, the most optimistic people say they sleep better and longer, are less likely to be sleepy during the day, and are 74% more likely to report no symptoms of insomnia, according to a study July 24 in *Behavioral Medicine*. The research involved more than 3,500 people ages 32 to 51.

The researchers don't know exactly how optimism influences sleep, which in turn is linked to better health, but lead author Rosalba Hernandez, a professor at the University of Illinois, ventures this hypothesis: "Optimists are more likely to engage in active problem-focused coping and to interpret stressful events in more positive ways, reducing worry and ruminative thoughts when they're falling asleep and throughout their sleep cycle."

"The most optimistic older women had a 38% lower risk of dying from heart disease than the least optimistic."

Meanwhile, a study in 2015 found the most optimistic people ages 45 to 84 are twice as likely to have ideal heart health compared to the least optimistic, based on several measures including diet, physical activity, and blood sugar and cholesterol levels.

Researchers last year linked optimism to better heart health in a review of several studies, one of which showed the most optimistic older women had a 38% lower risk of dying from heart disease than the least optimistic. The review, published in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, also found optimists more apt to engage in healthy habits, including good diets and regular physical activity, and that they tend to have healthier body weight, blood pressure, glucose, and cholesterol levels.

Optimists are better at managing stressors, says the review's lead author, Darwin Labarthe, a professor of Preventive Medicine at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. If others are faced with factors out of their control, they begin to shift their goals and are more likely to eat poorly, fail to exercise, smoke, or engage in other bad health habits, "which would ultimately result in raising inflammation levels and less favorable overall heart health."

Labarthe also says it's not entirely clear what is the cause and what is the effect... "But the answer may be both directions — greater optimism promoting health, better health fostering greater optimism," he says.

Can you change yourself into an optimist?

Optimism (or pessimism) might be partly genetic. A study of twins back in 1992 suggested that about 25% of a person's optimism is inherited. But that doesn't mean someone is stuck with whatever their parents gave them. A person's general level of optimism tends to be stable over days or weeks. But across years, it can rise or fall depending on what life brings. Age is also a factor: Optimism is typically low for people in their twenties, rises through the thirties and forties, and peaks at around age 55 before declining gradually, according to findings published earlier this year.

People who are optimistic and goal-oriented — based on agreeing strongly with statements like “I can find something positive, even in the worst situations” and “When I encounter problems, I don't give up until I solve them” — experienced greater reductions in depression, anxiety, and panic disorders over an 18-year period compared to the glass-half-empty type, according to a study earlier this year.

“Our findings suggest that people can improve their mental health by raising or maintaining high levels of tenacity, resilience, and optimism,” says lead author Nur Hani Zainal at Penn State. “Aspiring toward personal and career goals can make people feel like their lives have meaning. On the other hand, disengaging from striving toward those aims or having a cynical attitude can have high mental health costs.”

Indeed, optimism can be fostered, research shows, by visualizing oneself at the center of positive future events. The exercise involves seeing the accomplishment of an important goal through rose-colored mental glasses — perhaps a major career achievement, supreme physical shape, or being surrounded by wonderful friends. This “imagining a best possible self” can “increase expectancies for a positive future,” one study found.

The results of studies like these “are encouraging,” Labarthe says, “though the studies have generally been small in numbers of participants and short-term rather than long-term in assessing durability of effects.”

Lee, the Boston University researcher, agrees that research does suggest that “interventions, such as imagining yourself in a future in which everything has turned out well, or more intensive cognitive-behavioral therapy, can raise levels of optimism. What we don't know yet, is whether raising optimism can, in turn, improve health and longevity.”

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