

## Science / Medicine

## Optimists Considered Better Equipped to Battle Stress and Win

By AUBIN TYLER

An emerging body of research on how people cope with adversity suggests that those who deal most effectively with life's problems share certain traits, perhaps even subconscious strategies.

Optimists, for instance, tend to be good copers. In a series of studies, Charles S. Carver, professor of psychology at the University of Miami in Florida, found that an optimistic outlook—expecting a good outcome for the future—led to more successful rehabilitation in heart surgery patients, less postpartum depression in new mothers and a greater chance for sustained sobriety in recovering alcoholics.

But there is more going on here than just the power of positive thinking, according to Carver, who reported his findings at the American Psychological Assn. annual meeting in New York last year. Optimists actively try to work through their problems while pessimists tend to sweep them under the rug, which only makes things worse.

Among heart patients scheduled for coronary bypass surgery, Carver and colleague Michael F. Scheier found optimists made plans and set goals for their recovery period, instead of dwelling on sad or nervous feelings. A week later, pessimists were trying to block out thoughts about their recovery while optimists tried to acquire as much information as they could about their recommended regimens. Optimists recovered faster than pessimists, despite the fact that their health was no better prior to surgery, including the level of artery occlusion.

"Pessimists become absorbed in their feelings of distress, which may prevent them from taking action toward solving a problem," Carver pointed out. They

tend to get caught up in denial, acting as though a problem does not exist. Optimists are less likely to do this. They accept the reality of a problem as part of coping, taking the attitude that you cannot do something about a problem until you admit it is a problem.

"Optimists, at least by self report, engage in active planning and 'restraint coping,' which involves taking one's time, waiting for the right opportunity, thinking strategically," he said. "They also try to find something positive in stressful circumstances, to learn and grow from a negative experience."

Carver suspects that pessimists are actually more realistic about life's difficulties, a fact that nonetheless works against them. "Most people are optimistic by nature, perhaps unrealistically so," he said. Yet, because optimists expect a good outcome and continue to strive for it, they probably create more opportunities for success.

**Self-Fulfilling Prophecy**

Pessimists will say "What's the use? Why bother?" until that line of reasoning becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This holds true for personal relationships, too. A pessimist is more likely to end a friendship after an argument, rather than try to work things out.

Can certain generalizations be made about how to cope better? "Practically, I'm tempted to recommend developing a positive attitude, but most people scoff at this," Carver said. "If you can't think like an optimist, try to act like one, even if it feels fraudulent. Focus on effective coping using the optimist's strategies."

This includes breaking problems down into their component parts and dealing with one part at a time; do

not try to do everything at once (and become overwhelmed); do apply persistence and continued effort, even if it seems like you are doing the same thing over and over again.

"Optimists tend to think they can solve a problem if they just look at it right. This keeps them in the game long enough so that they do," Carver added. "Once you get in the habit of always making the effort, planning, trying to learn something from every experience, things change inside."

**Defensive Pessimism**

What about people who always expect the worst but end up smelling like a rose? Nancy Cantor, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, labels this coping strategy "defensive pessimism." Cantor and colleague Julie Norem found that some college students, all high achievers, used negative expectations to cushion themselves from anxiety before a test or other academic challenge.

Unlike realistic pessimists who expect to do badly and do, defensive pessimists expect the worst but know from past experience that they will probably do all right.

"Defensive pessimism can be an effective way to cope with anxiety, and it can serve as a positive motivation to do well—in the short run," Cantor said. "But over time, the emotional ups and downs, the worrying and negative emotions may cause a buildup of stress that takes its toll."

Behavioral scientists in Illinois think some people possess certain beliefs about themselves and the world—the "hardy" personality—that help them to resist stress. The research began 10 years ago with a

study of mid- and upper-level executives at a large utility company. "These people were all under high stress, yet some were breaking down physically or psychologically while others seemed to be thriving," said Stephen Kahn, research director of the University of Chicago Stress Project. "The question was what differentiated them?"

**Commitment to Work**

The researchers found three characteristics that distinguished the emotionally hardy: commitment to meaningful work, having interest or enjoyment in what they did, a sense of control, the feeling they could influence some aspect of the world around them and act on that belief, and challenge, seeing life as a series of opportunities for growth instead of shrinking back into static security.

Like Carver, Kahn observed that people who successfully buffer stress are forward looking; they approach life and its problems rather than avoid them. "This seems to dilute stress before it turns to physical and mental strain," Kahn said. "And people can learn to do this."

In hardiness training courses, Kahn and colleagues teach executives to face difficulties head-on. First, by using their imagination to put problems in perspective and analyze them from different angles, recognizing emotional constituents, and then devising a plan of action.

Tyler is a free-lance medical writer based in Hoboken, N.J.