

# Realistic Optimism

# Objectives

- Define realistic optimism
- Discuss the many benefits of shifting to more positive ways of thinking
- Identify signature strengths
- Learn how to build realistic optimism
- Create a plan for following through

# Thoughts on Optimism

*“What we want is not blind optimism but flexible optimism – optimism with its eyes open. We must be able to use pessimism’s keen sense of reality when we need it, but without having to dwell in its dark shadows. The benefits of this kind of optimism are, I believe, without limit.” --Martin Seligman, PhD*

*“Optimism: The fuel of Heroes, the enemy of despair, the creator of the future.” --Max More*

## What is Realistic Optimism?

- A particular style by which you explain the events that happen to you, and then choose what actions you will take in response to those events
- IT IS NOT simply positive thinking, a denial of problems, or a conviction that everything happens for the best
- ‘Authentic’ happiness entails more than just positive feelings
- The focus is on strengths, reframing, and re-labeling

***You do not have to be ‘an optimist’ to practice realistic optimism!***

# Why Realistic Optimism?

## Individuals who practice realistic optimism tend to:

- Manage stress well
- Maintain high productivity in the face of setbacks
- Avoid over-generalizing negative events, and are usually able to move past them fairly quickly
- Enjoy long-term success in work, sports, and politics
- Stay healthier and live longer

# Optimism and Sports

- Researchers found that basketball teams' explanatory styles strongly predicted their level of success the following season
  - Example: Celtics vs. Nets
- In a study of baseball's National League, optimistic statements predicted success, while pessimistic statements predicted failure
- Olympic swimmer Matt Biondi's positive thinking lead him to win five gold medals

# Optimism's Impact on Business and Politics

- Nine out of the ten candidates who made negative statements, or self-deprecating remarks, lost to those who expressed more optimistic views
- At American Express Financial Advisors, a pilot test of optimism training increased sales enough after only three months to make it a standard part of training
- An assessment of employees in a sales department found that those scoring highest on the optimism scale outsold others in their first year by 27% percent, and by 37% over their first two years

## Optimism is Good for Your Health!

- In a study of college students, optimists had half as many infectious illnesses and visits to the doctor as the pessimists
- A study of women with breast cancer showed that those who optimistically fought the disease were more likely to survive than those who responded to their diagnosis with fatalistic passivity
- According to a study sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health, optimists live longer than pessimists
- Researchers have linked a more optimistic outlook in older men with a dramatically reduced risk of coronary heart disease (CHD)

## But, Bad Things Really do Happen

- Realistic optimism does not deny tragic events, but:
  - Focuses on identifying and utilizing strengths/resources
  - Emphasizes the concept of resilience
  - Provides strategies for identifying and developing signature strengths

*“A happy life consists not in the absence, but in the mastery of hardships.” --Helen Keller*

# What are Signature Strengths?

Examples of signature strengths include:

- Authenticity, bravery, creativity
- Curiosity, dedication, enthusiasm
- Emotional intelligence, fairness, forgiveness
- Generosity, gratitude
- Hopefulness, humor, kindness
- Loyalty, leadership
- Modesty, originality, open-mindedness
- Resourcefulness, spirituality, team-oriented

## Why are Signature Strengths so Important?

- Gives us a sense of ownership, and allows us to increase our ‘subjective well-being’
- Helps us remain resilient when times are tough
- We all have certain aspects of our lives that we would like to see change - we can utilize our signature strengths to set goals, and implement changes
- Signature strengths can apply to many possible domains, including love and intimacy, profession, finances, family, social, play/fun, health and fitness, learning, spirituality, and overall life satisfaction

## A Little Goes a Long Way

- In order to put our signature strengths ‘to work’ for us, we must practice them
- Setting small goals can result in big changes
- Most of our happiness comes from within; not from external sources
- Emotion is generated by thought, and driven by interpretation
- While we can not always control what happens in life, we can change our thoughts about the events

## It's Important to be Realistic

- Realism and optimism need not be in conflict
- We must practice separating facts from interpretations
- When you have 'interpretative latitude', you can realistically choose more positive interpretations:
  - Leniency toward the past (the *benefit of the doubt* principle)
  - Being alert to what's positive in the present (the *appreciate the moment* principle)
  - Choosing to see the future as a challenge/opportunity instead of a problem (the *window of opportunity* principle)

# Building Realistic Optimism

- Choose to focus on thoughts, events, and interpretations that induce constructive activity
- Keep events in proportion--reframe thoughts about situations
- Make a concerted effort to celebrate other's successes, as well as personal achievements
- Take personal responsibility: Look at the part you play in bringing about the results you want
- Cultivate a sense of humor - humor is a critical piece of optimism, and can be seen as both a cause and result of it

## Building Realistic Optimism, Cont'd

- Remain realistic and authentic: Apply reason to find ways of assessing and achieving goals, but avoid 'sugar-coating'
- Value self-improvement: Recognize the possibilities for continuing growth and self-improvement
- Seek to be experimental: Actively search for, and create novel approaches
- Select the environment: Find people and places that inspire, support, and assist
- Strive for realistic goals and standards - not perfection!

## Realistic Optimism ‘to go’

- We all have negative thoughts sometimes, and that’s OK!
- Patterns of thinking will not change overnight; realistic optimism is a process that we will always be practicing
- Be patient with yourself as you work to notice and reframe your thoughts
- Find ways to incorporate your ‘signature strengths’ into your daily routine
- Talk to someone you trust about what you’re working on, or call *E4 Health* for support

We appreciate your time and attention. Please let us know if you have any questions.

Thank you.