



SUPPORTING THE HEALTH  
AND WELLBEING OF THE  
ARMED FORCES  
COMMUNITY AND CIVILIAN  
FAMILIES IN CORNWALL



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## *Helpful Thinking Styles*

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Some neuroscientists think that humans have a built-in negative bias because we have been programmed to ask ourselves: “What if?” For millennia, this question has been a factor in our survival and even now it has a useful purpose. However, the level to which it has been imprinted on our minds, has resulted in our inability to ask, “What if it doesn’t happen?” or “What if it does work?” To redress this imbalance of the negative “What if?”, it will take a dose of positivity or at least, some learnt helpfulness, instead of learnt helplessness.

Learnt helplessness is the feeling that everything that one tries seems useless. Learnt helpfulness lies in the belief, “Circumstance will improve because humans have survived pandemics in the past and are even better equipped to do so now!” If we can learn to be pessimistic, we can also learn to view upsets optimistically, or at least extract some positives from setbacks and learn to be resilient.

Success does not rely exclusively on, talent and desire, optimism is also a key component.

There are two types of mindsets: optimistic and pessimistic. The optimist thinks that a bad situation is temporary, isolated and interesting. They assess their role in a problem-solving way. They view obstacles and trauma as a learning opportunity and a challenge to do better. The pessimist views a bad situation as long term and personal. They often focus on placing blame (themselves or others) excuses, denial and helplessness and the situation tends to impact negatively on them and those around them. Pessimism is self – fulfilling, it converts a mishap into a disaster and a disaster into a catastrophe.

Can optimism be a learnt? Yes, it can.....

Ideas on how to improve ‘thinking style’

1. Think of bad events as having a temporary duration, this encourages resilience.
2. Take ownership of your positive achievements.
3. Associate upsets with specific causes.
4. Remember that optimism leads to, better health, youthfulness, longevity and a stronger immune system.
5. Realise that your actions can make a difference. The earlier in life one learns this, the better.

6. Genetics, environment and hormones play a part in the development of depression, but an optimistic mindset can be the deciding factor in whether it is triggered and flourishes.
7. Cognitive therapy can reduce and eliminate depression and help us nurture optimism.
8. Challenge automatic negative thoughts. Focus on evidence to the contrary. Break the habit of automatic negative thinking.
9. Pessimism has its place; pessimists sometimes foresee challenges and obstacles before optimists. They just don't deal with them in such a positive way.
10. If your childhood caregiver had an optimistic mindset, you will also probably have the same mindset. Conversely, if you have inherited a pessimistic style, you can change to an optimistic one through learning and practice.
11. Sports teams who are more optimistic go on to be more successful.
12. Research has shown that choice and control in thinking saves lives, as opposed to helplessness which can kill when it leads to hopelessness.
13. Studies have shown that women with breast cancer who have an optimistic outlook, respond better to treatment than those with a pessimistic outlook.
14. An optimistic approach to politics has been associated with voter popularity ..... just think of Barack Obama's 'You Can' speech.
15. Assess the cost of failure. Where it's high, do not use optimism; where low, use optimism. The danger lies in being **overly** optimistic for example, the RNLI Rescue Boat deciding whether to go in and rescue people off a cliff, or the individual who has had too much alcohol and decides to drive home. Here the costs of failure could be death and a motor vehicle accident/death. As opposed to the individual who risks learning a different sport, risks only upset, being optimistic.
16. When pessimistic beliefs appear, use distraction. You might like to wear a rubber band around your wrist and snap it when pessimistic ruminating kicks in, and then shift your attention elsewhere. Alternatively, carry a reminder around which says 'STOP' which may help when ruminating starts!
17. When pessimistic beliefs appear, become aware of them, and say to yourself that you will attend to them later at a given time. Write them down so that you have a record. This can take the sting out of rumination and the negative beliefs lose their power.
18. Dispute the pessimism. This is more of a long-term strategy. Using Cognitive Therapy ABCDE process.
  - A – adversity: what is the stimulus or what happened?
  - B - belief: what is the underlying belief?
  - C – what is the consequence of your belief?
  - D – Dispute the belief

- E – energize the dispute.

By using this process, you can give yourselves distance from the belief and practice disputing the claim. This can be used for disputing what others' say or believe but also what you say to yourself. Ask what evidence do I have to support this belief? Don't confuse 'The Power of Positive Thinking' with optimistic thinking. The power of optimism is through non-negative thinking. Upsets usually have many causes; pessimists usually hang on to the personal ones. Try to think about other possible beliefs which may be the cause. If this is difficult, deconstruct the belief and make it less powerful. Ask how useful is this belief and how can I change it to serve me better in the future?

19. With children, when taking them through the ABCDE, emphasise that the way they think can make them feel a certain way. To assist the child with this process, try the ABC first and then the DE. You could even use a puppet, if they are still young, as the disputer to help your child talk back at others and themselves. It is particularly important to be sensitive and use the appropriate words so as not to do any harm. For example, the puppet could say: "you know sometimes that other people say nasty things about us and sometimes we even say nasty things to ourselves about ourselves.....".

20. If you can meditate with your child, or on your own, you can observe how your mind latches on to negative thoughts and ideas. This offers the power to change the 'mind-talk' from something negative into something new, positive, useful, and/or realistic.

One major advantage of the optimistic thinking style is that it breeds perseverance and can therefore motivate people to use their strengths and improve on areas they have potential for growth. The current Covid 19 pandemic has resulted in some people feeling helpless. We can intervene with hope and optimistic thinking so that they don't become hopeless, which could lead to large-scale depression.

Now, more than ever, we need to learn to be optimistic and provide positive role models for our communities to follow. By doing this, we are not just focussing on our individual needs but on the needs of our communities, a practice associated with happiness and thereby improved wellbeing.

What you think' you are.

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