



e-quilibrium

- *"electronic briefs on behavior and health"*

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Optimism

New Year's resolutions commonly involve a determination to make behavior changes aimed at improving health. Most people are optimistic about making progress and/or being successful at the time the resolution is made, even though it is well known that many people have a poor track record at keeping such resolutions. A quote from an old Ziggy cartoon may well explain the lack of success with resolutions... "the road to failure is actually the path of least persistence."

Optimism is, in fact, a valuable asset with respect to health. Several decades of research have found links between optimism and better health outcomes. A recent study examined this research using a method (meta-analysis) in which results of multiple studies are analyzed together as if it is just one large study. Published in the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, this study affirmed a strong relationship between optimism and health.

There have been two general ways in which optimism has been understood and measured in this research. The first is to view optimism as a personality characteristic in which people generally expect positive outcomes. The second construes optimism as the manner in which people explain outcomes, especially negative outcomes, because such explanations have implications for how the future is viewed. The recent meta-analysis found that optimism is related to health, no matter which way optimism is measured.

Furthermore, optimism predicted better health in studies that used different designs and methods. Optimism is

associated with better health whether health is measured subjectively or objectively. The relationship is present with a variety of health outcomes (survival, immune function, quality of life, cancer course, etc.). Optimism contributes to better health even after the effect of chronic negative emotion (known to be harmful to health) is accounted for.

Why is optimism an asset for health? There appears to be a number of pathways. Perhaps the most obvious pathway is health behavior. People who expect positive outcomes typically behave in a manner consistent with attaining the goal. Believing that physical activity will improve health increases commitment to actually being physically active. There is evidence that optimistic people, on average, experience fewer negative life events, a finding that also has a behavioral component. And physiological pathways related to stress and immune function are also believed to be relevant in the link between optimism and health.

Optimism can be learned and enhanced. Like any other behavioral or cognitive change, practice is required. Perhaps a revision of the earlier quote from Ziggy can capture this resolve: "The road to *better health* is actually the path of *optimistic* persistence."

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