

It pays to cultivate an optimistic mindset, says Dr Terry Paulson as he reveals eight truths that will help you take on any challenge that life throws at you

The Optimism advantage

WHEN YOU'RE ENCOUNTERING difficult situations, you want answers. When life gives you a headache, you want something to take away the pain, and you want to avoid getting another one! Although you'll find plenty of useful answers and practical advice in this article, getting advice is probably not your primary problem. You've received more than your share of good advice from other authors, friends, teachers, and passing gurus. The challenge lies in making that good advice work for your life and your career.

That's why this article won't coddle you; it'll challenge you with some unsettling truth-telling that's designed to help you transform your attitudes, relationships, habits, and choices. Those changes will help you experience the optimism advantage. But for optimism to work, you have to do the work to think and act differently!



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1 Optimists accept that life is difficult

The first truth in the great game of life is worth memorising—life is difficult! So get over it. No sweet-talking politician, fairy godmother, or genie is coming to sprinkle stardust or grant three wishes. Embracing optimism is about embracing self-reliance, personal responsibility, and the work of changing your thought patterns and your actions. It doesn't mean that you're denying reality; it's simply about positively coping with that reality to succeed in the face of life's challenges.

If you think optimism means adopting a Pollyanna mindset where everything turns out right, then you've got the wrong idea. That's simply self-help hype! True optimists have earned their positive attitude from a proven track record of overcoming real obstacles. They did it the old-fashioned way; they earned confidence one obstacle, one challenge, and one victory at a time!

Life is a self-help project, but you're not working on it alone

Developing maturity at any age is all about realising that life is essentially a self-help project. Now, that's a good thing, because it's your life. How you define success, nurture your own education and career, respond to your problems, and make your choices allows you to shape your life the way you want it lived. That's both a life-affirming opportunity and a personal responsibility, but, as you realise, it also comes with your share of frustrating challenges. As an optimist, you'd want it no other way.

But optimists are not alone, and neither are you. Contacts in your local community, family,

Find perspective and get on with life

Faced with a diagnosis of Parkinson's Disease, award-winning actor and author of *Always Looking Up*, Michael J. Fox had to find a way to accept this painful reality and continue to make the best of his life. When commenting on his optimistic attitude in an ABC special, Michael said, "The answer had very little to do with protection and everything to do with perspective. The only unavailable choice was whether or not to have Parkinson's. Everything else was up to me. I could concentrate on the loss or just get on with life and maybe see if the holes started filling in for themselves."

Michael's optimistic journey from adversity to a renewed appreciation for life can be applied to your life as well. As bad as his disease can be, Fox found a way to make it a gift. Taken with the right perspective, even adversity can be a blessing that opens unseen doors and a new appreciation for life. When we are confronted by death, disease, or an accident, the value of a day takes on an entirely new meaning.



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professional network, and fellow members of your faith community can help you make your way on life's journey. Although all of these people can support you, it's up to you to develop and tap those resources. Optimists don't merely settle for the relationships that find them. To claim your own optimism advantage, you need to realise who matters, who never did, who shouldn't anymore, who still does, and who you want to add to your team. The bottom line is simple: Seek out relationships that encourage and support the person you want to be. Self-reliance doesn't require you to discount or dismiss the importance of others. It's simply about building healthy relationships that work for both parties. If you give value, you usually get value.

Choose learned optimism over learned helplessness

Modern-day living has a way of reinforcing how little you control and making it far too easy to become a victim. Victims feel that they can't do anything to make a difference in what happens to them. Since they have no confidence in their own ability to cope with adversity and earn their own success, they avoid seemingly useless constructive actions, preferring instead to wait for fate to deal its hand. Both their headaches and their happiness come from what happens to them, instead of as a result of their own actions. Victims look for ways to blame those who contribute to their pain.

Optimists are the opposite of victims. With positive attitudes built on a personal track record of overcoming adversity, they believe in their own ability to achieve their goals and overcome whatever obstacles hinder them. When dealt a poor hand, they look for ways to play it well. They take pride in their achievements and look forward to life's challenges.

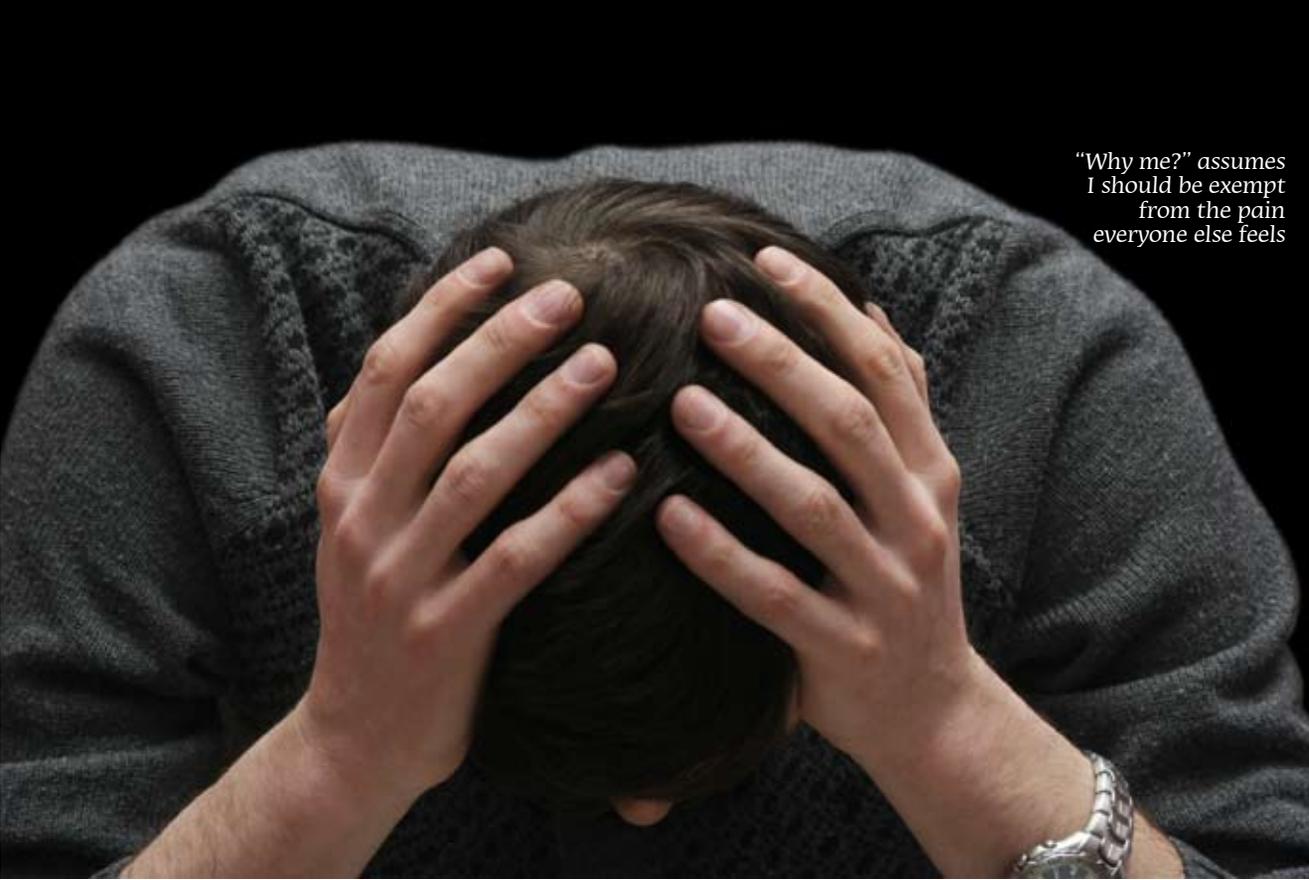
The choice is yours. You can trade your victim thinking and learned helplessness for the optimistic attitudes and actions that will help you develop your own resilience, persistence, resourcefulness, and results.

Star in your own positive soap opera

Unfortunately, claiming your own optimism advantage takes more than the mere decision to do so. It requires a long history of changing how you think and act. This isn't a movie that's all wrapped up in a fancy bow in two hours. This is a soap opera, and you're the only star who counts. Your challenge is to make your life's soap opera as positive as possible. You'll want to fill your cast with people who will encourage and support you, and steer clear of those who belittle and doubt you.

Like any soap opera, there'll be challenges, setbacks, victories, defeats, laughter, tears, joy, grief, record profits, and sizable losses. Your job is to keep making progress in claiming the life you want to live, one day at a time, one choice at a time.

Stop being your own worst enemy and start becoming your own best advocate. Take the time to learn how to trade your negative thoughts and unproductive worries for the positive attitudes and constructive actions that will help you produce winning results.



“Why me?” assumes I should be exempt from the pain everyone else feels

2 Optimists control what they can, and accept and use what they can't

Cultivating optimistic attitudes and actions is our focus here, but one of its guiding truths comes from what has been affectionately called the Serenity Prayer, a simple but powerful statement that was written by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr:

“God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

Whether you believe in God or not, you can appreciate the value and depth of this statement and the sentiments it promotes. As an optimist in training, you must learn how to accept and maximize your reaction to both the blessings and the adversity that come your way and take responsibility for managing your own motivation, attitudes, and actions in a way that makes a difference to the quality of your life.

Deal with the hand you're dealt

Life deals you both bad and good hands. You—and countless others—struggle with the tough times and can easily take for granted life's many blessings. As an optimist, you'll learn to play both well.

After all, the bad hands are the ones that tend

to get your attention. Everybody has and will continue to experience bad days—an unwelcome diagnosis, a stock market fall, a terminated job, a lost loved one, a game you should have won, personal rejections, customers who go to a competitor, and natural disasters you couldn't have planned for. You hope for more, but you aren't thrown by less because we are all in this together.

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Years ago, a cancer survivor shared with a friend his struggle with the question “Why me?” After a moment's silence, his friend asked, “Did you ever think to ask yourself ‘Why not me?’” It had never occurred to him to even ask that question.

That question unleashed a liberating insight. He realized that life is neither fair nor unfair; it's simply life. Bad things can happen to anyone. “Why me?” assumes I should be exempt from the pain everyone else feels. “Why not me?” is humbling and appropriate. It introduces us to the reality that life's challenges happen to everyone.

Difficult days are facts of life, but learning to deal well with those difficult times can help you become stronger.

Your choice: victim or resilient survivor

No matter what life deals you, refuse to label yourself a victim! Depending on what has happened to you, you might find it tempting to

Don't just watch negative news; get busy making your own

Hours spent daily watching television news will do more to add to your depression than to alleviate your feelings of helplessness. So find your own sources to keep you informed about what you need to know, but watch your doses!

A local news show producer, frustrated with complaints about how negative media news had become, did a little truth telling of his own: "That's the nature of the beast. If you lead with a positive story, they'll click their way to another station. I'm embarrassed to even say this, but for every day of the year, we have footage of past deaths and disasters. If there is no current crisis, we can always have anniversaries of old ones!"

Princess Diana will conveniently die every year on cue. The news media is prepared to bring any disaster, political scandal, or graphic crime to your television within minutes. If terrorists and criminals aren't bad enough, we're constantly made aware of the dangerous germs that confront us from every public place and from the air we share on planes. With some welcome exceptions, producers still fill hours and editors fill pages with some of the worst news our world has to offer. The frantic and energizing challenge of delivering "bad" news 24/7 often comes at the expense of our optimism and perceived opportunities.

You are likely to find that once you cut your intake of negative news, you will experience a change in attitude. If you are going to continue to watch, actively seek out more stories and programmes that uplift you and give you hope in what you can do to better your life.

label yourself as a victim. But allowing yourself to embrace that label can strip you of the will and the positive attitude you need to overcome the adversities you will continue to encounter. Optimists, by definition, refuse to let what happened to them define or limit their lives.

3 Optimists know the importance of good health

As an optimist, you want a body built to last and a quality of life worth living. By taking care of yourself and being responsible for your health habits, you're more likely to live longer, feel better, and reduce your medical costs. There is also evidence that some health habits have a strong impact on your

attitude. Most reputable health organisations have a consistent list of recommendations: get adequate sleep, limit alcohol consumption, and stop smoking.

Optimists want a body ready for action

On average, people are living longer these days. If you're like most, it isn't just the number of years you live that matters to you; it's the quality of those years. You want to be active for as long as possible, which means that you need a body ready for action. The less healthy you are, the fewer choices you have.

You don't have to eat perfectly to make a difference in your health and your attitude; the same is true in terms of exercise. I've seen myself run, and I'm not going to win any Olympic medals in track. While some individuals have bodies built for athletic excellence and professional-level competition, most of us have a body that, when healthy, can give us the vitality, strength, and



Complete Wellbeing

"You miss 100 percent of the shots you never take"
—Wayne Gretzky



mobility we need to live the life we want.

So whether you like your body or not, there is no replacement. Take care of your body, or it just may not take care of you!

4 Optimists embrace action

Optimists cultivate a bias for action. You can't change what has happened to you, but you can embrace the action imperative and do what you can to invent a better future—starting immediately. Optimism is all about making a move to turn your worries and concerns into constructive action.

The tragedy of life is not how soon it ends, but how long you wait to begin it. To become more optimistic, spend a lot less time ruminating about what has already happened and a lot more time choosing, moving, trying, tasting, experiencing, serving, enjoying . . . living.

You miss 100 percent of the shots you never take

Hockey great Wayne Gretzky credited one of his early coaches for making him aware of an important truth. After pulling him aside after a difficult loss, the coach said, "You out-skated everyone out there on the ice, but you didn't take a shot on net. Miss some tomorrow night! You miss 100 percent of

the shots you never take." Gretzky took the advice and, of course, went on to be the most prolific scorer in National Hockey League history.

Mistakes and failures are the price you pay for achieving any success. Most success stories involve failures, perseverance, resourcefulness—and, above all, action. True optimists both lose and win more frequently. Failures don't keep them down for long; they bounce back quickly to get right back in the game. You've doubtlessly had your share of failures and setbacks, but that's the price you pay to lead a life worth living

Life is all about one day at a time. So today, invest your worry time in constructive action and feel the pride and optimism that purposeful action generates.

5 Optimists dispute catastrophic thoughts

Okay, so you can shape your own circumstance and make your own luck up to a point, but there's no denying that bad luck does exist. We've all had our share of unpleasant days; we've all suffered and experienced major disappointments. We've had to deal with the pain of loss as well as the random misery that nature can unleash.

Good employees sometimes lose their jobs through no fault of their own, and even the best

sales professionals lose their share of sales from time to time. Hurricanes level some homes while leaving others only feet away completely intact. Illness and accidents can take lives seemingly years too early.

The glass sometimes is more than half empty. In the short run, everything doesn't always happen for the best. But no matter how bad the hand you're dealt in life, you can still strive to make the best of what happens. Optimists have learned to master the mental and emotional inner dialogue that allows you to do just that. Jeffrey Lawrence Benjamin, author of *How to Get What You Want Now*, said it well: "The most important things ever said are the things you've said to yourself." However, what you

say to yourself in the face of adversity is not always constructive.

Win the argument with your negative beliefs to change your attitude and your actions

Business philosopher Jim Rohn put it well when he said, "You have to stand guard at the door of your mind." Essentially, that means being ready to argue with some of your negative beliefs. If your critical thinking habits aren't helping you get where you want to go, there's no time like the present to take them on. Author of *Learned Optimism*, Martin Seligman suggests four ways to make your self-arguments convincing: evidence, alternatives,

implications, and usefulness. I'll add a fifth—faith.

Evidence—Only the Facts!

Optimists find a centring strength in playing detective. Though many readers are probably too young to have heard of Dagnet's Joe Friday, this early television character had one simple statement that defined his approach to solving every crime. When he'd take out his trusty notepad to take down information, he'd caution: "Just the facts, ma'am!"

Play your version of Joe Friday in looking at your own beliefs. A patient receiving test results from a biopsy who hears the word 'cancer' may react immediately with a frightening belief—"My God, I'm going to die of cancer!" Doctors must not only treat the disease but also fight the inaccurate beliefs that can work against the patient's chances of recovery.

Taking a diagnosis like this well doesn't mean silence or blind acceptance of fate. Whether at that moment or at the next follow-up visit, the optimist detective is there with pen and paper in hand, armed with important questions to assess the difficulty of the challenge they face: *At what stage did we catch the cancer? How aggressive is it? What is the survival rate? What treatments are best in light of my particular situation?*

Optimists are realists. An optimistic approach to something devastating—like a cancer diagnosis—does not mean that every patient will beat the disease. The mere act of engaging in fact-checking can help you tremendously. You change your focus from ruminating and emotional paralysis to a more productive way of viewing the problem—one that may soon translate into more constructive feelings and actions.

Alternatives—Seek less self-destructive explanations

Optimists are ready to accept non-personal causes that can explain a disappointing result. It is important to accept responsibility when it is appropriate. But instead of always assuming that something is your fault, be ready to entertain a more favourable explanation. For example, after receiving his first territory, a sales representative was eager to make inroads on some new accounts to impress his boss. After being encouraged to send a proposal to a potentially big customer, he told his boss that he anticipated an order later in the week.

The new rep was disappointed and frustrated when the purchaser called and said that they had

decided to go with a different vendor. He thought he had handled the call well and deserved the business; he was quick to talk to his boss about the decision. His boss said with a knowing smile, "He does that with every new rep. His brother-in-law is the other vendor. He just uses your proposal to show his boss that he's open to a competitive bid. As long as he's married, he isn't giving us the business. Don't take every sale personally. It's often not your fault." That's good advice in facing any adversity.

Implications—Realistic likely consequences

Don't make any disaster or misfortune worse than it is. Instead of assuming the worst consequences, take a realistic look at the most likely consequences to your setback. Former football coach Don Shula had years of experience behind him when he told his young players, "Keep your perspective. Success is not forever, and failure isn't fatal." That's not just good advice for football, but in the game of life as well.

Usefulness—Will worry work?

Worry can exact a price that is sometimes worse than adversity itself. Research has shown that merely worrying about an event can be more detrimental to one's health than actually enduring the event itself. In fact, two University of Michigan studies followed more than 3,000 employed participants for more than two years.

Those who were chronically insecure about losing their jobs reported worse overall health and were more depressed than those who actually lost their jobs. Persistent worry takes its toll on your health and attitude.

If your negative belief is still stubbornly resisting all efforts to minimize its significance and impact, you might need to ask a very practical question: Will wasting any more time mulling over this situation produce any long-term value? Will prolonged problem solving get you closer to where you ultimately want to go? If not, it's time to be practical. It's time to let it go. Sometimes your goals have changed, and overcoming the problem isn't even relevant anymore. In short, some problems and disasters are worth leaving in the rear view mirror and moving on.

Faith—Search for God's open door

Any discussion on attitude and beliefs would be incomplete without addressing the role that faith

Watch your self-speak, specially in times of adversity



plays in coping with adversity for so many people. Self-reliance is a powerful value and an empowering strategy, but it has its limits. You may find support in a shared faith community and comfort by having faith in God's providence.

The paradoxical advice most often attributed to St. Ignatius provides a powerful insight: "Pray as if everything depends on God. Act as if it depends upon you." This statement highlights the importance of accepting God's will while simultaneously working to live out that will. You do what you can and trust that God will do the rest. Faith like this can lead to inner peace and constructive action.

6 Optimists give thanks and express gratitude

We live much of our lives on autopilot. While adversity often gets our attention, the many daily blessings and gifts we experience go by without notice. We seldom take time to even consider the electricity that powers homes and businesses, but when the power is out, we're quickly reminded of how important it is to our lives. Whether it is love or lights, it is absence that makes the heart grow fonder.

In short, it's easy to complain about the difficulties and adversity that we face, but far too few of us learn the importance of giving thanks for the many happy accidents and blessings that we experience daily, on and off the job. Those who do are more optimistic and happy. Roman orator and politician Cicero said centuries ago: "Gratitude is not only the greatest of all virtues, but the parent of all the others."

Avoid pits people and the complain game

Do you know any Pits People? Those are the people with whom every conversation involves some kind of complaining. They simply cannot see the positive aspect of anything—their personal lives, their professional lives, or society overall. "The economy is the pits; this company is the pits. In fact, you're the pits!" After 30 minutes with a Pits Person, everyone's morale is sagging.

So don't get stuck playing the Complain Game; you simply cannot do that and expect to be more optimistic. Start some new habits. Try responding in a more thankful or upbeat way during daily

conversations. People will ask you, "How's it going?" Simply answer, "I'm just blessed out!"

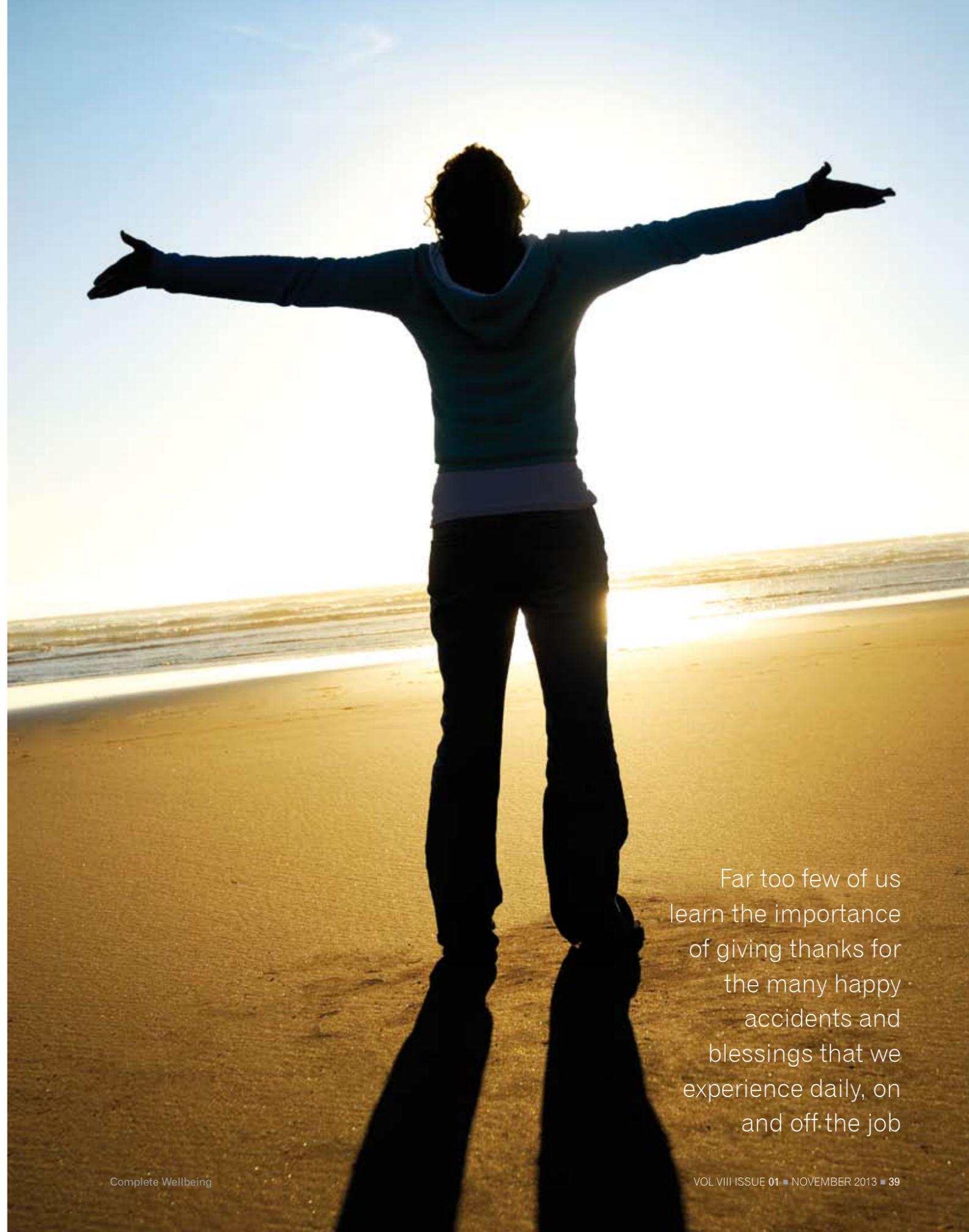
Some negative comments are necessary in business and in life, because hidden problems can become big problems. Let these negative people know that your goal is not to eliminate appropriate criticism; you'd just like them to consider adjusting their doses. After all, constant complaining isn't welcomed on or off the job. Request that they try interjecting a few more compliments about what's working well, so that others know they are part of the team. We listen to people who can tell the truth about what's working and what isn't.

7 Optimists catch themselves being effective

Constructive self-criticism is an important part of life, but so is self-support. Mistakes help you learn what not to do. Acknowledging your successes allows you to reinforce what's already working. So instead of repeatedly focusing on what's going wrong, take the optimistic approach and concentrate more intently on your own positives. Take time every day to examine what you've done that has contributed to your achievements—both on and off the job. After all, a big part of maintaining a healthy, optimistic perspective in challenging times is managing your own motivation. This requires that you catch yourself being effective. You've learned the importance of nurturing gratitude for the happy accidents that happen—those things that you don't control but can and should appreciate. It is all the more important to appreciate what you do control—the actions that you initiate.

When you cannot get a compliment any other way, give yourself one

Mark Twain had some excellent advice: "An occasional compliment is necessary to keep up one's self-respect. . . . When you cannot get a compliment any other way, pay yourself one." Twain's words encourage us once again to treat ourselves as we treat people we care about. You shouldn't take yourself for granted anymore than you would undervalue an associate, friend, or loved one. And while this is easy to state, very few people actually



Far too few of us learn the importance of giving thanks for the many happy accidents and blessings that we experience daily, on and off the job

live it. To build a strong and realistic self-confidence, you must develop a habit of recognising your own commendable actions on a daily basis.

This isn't about feeding a big ego; it's about becoming aware of your strengths as well as your mistakes. You may be winning and truly not know it—unless you're keeping score of your own effectiveness.

Unfortunately, it's far too easy to take yourself for granted. The reason is simply that you're around yourself all the time. Your own skills and accomplishments are like the pictures you hang on the wall. You enjoy them for a time, but after two weeks of walking by them, you don't even see them anymore. They become part of your gray zone of unobserved treasures—those things you possess but no longer experience or appreciate. You see them when you move or when new guests point them out when they visit. That's actually why you have guests—they show you your home! Don't hide your achievements in that gray zone of hidden treasures. Cultivate your confidence by scheduling time to appreciate yourself in your daily routine.

Your worst critic may be sitting in your seat

It's estimated that you assess some aspect of your performance between 300 to 400 times a day. You often break the flow of the day's activities—if only for a moment—to mentally evaluate your own performance.

Unfortunately, most of this self-analysis tends to be unfavourable. For the average person, 80 percent of internal dialogue regarding their own performance tends to be negative, and only 20 percent is positive. With that kind of critic on board all day long, you might be treated better if you spent time with your enemies!

Most of us are good at making ourselves feel worse—not better—about our mistakes and failures. But as an optimist, you can change that.

8 Optimists use humour as an ever-present stress breaker

Humour provides the counterbalance to life's more sombre moments. It's your inner upper, your mental recess, your ever-present safety valve, and one of the most effective stress breaks you will ever find.

After one couple managed to escape a raging California fire with nothing but their lives, the husband confided to a reporter, "We'll be fine. We've lost our home, but we've got the clothes on our back. We've had to start over before, and we can do it again."

The reporter was confused as the man's wife began to laugh and even more perplexed as the husband joined in. The wife—aware that the reporter was unsure of how to proceed in the live, on-scene broadcast—said to the camera, "My husband is right. We had to leave so fast, all we do have is the clothes on our back. Neither one of us have underwear!"

Even the cameraman had trouble keeping the image steady as the crew burst into laughter. Everyone watching was left with the sense that this couple was going to survive their personal catastrophe just fine. In fact, the woman's humorous comment turned a typical disaster news report into much-needed humour therapy for all those facing the loss of their own property. The reporter ended the coverage with the line, "Looks like I'm the only one here with underwear. Back to you in the studio!" Who would bet against this optimistic couple's ability to bounce back quickly from their loss?

Author and professor Norman Cousins observed the following during his own struggle with cancer: "Laughter interrupts the panic cycle of an illness." While it may not be a cure for cancer, there is some clinical evidence that laughter mobilizes the human body's defences and reduces pain.

Take your life and work seriously, but yourself lightly

The safest target for your humour will always be yourself. If you can learn to laugh at your errors, the world will laugh with you—not at you. Only the self-confident can admit their mistakes. Laughing at your own errors will help you let go of mistakes and rebound quicker to get back into the game, and that's what optimism is all about. We all like to

be with people who are comfortable in their own skin—pimples, warts, receding hairlines, and all.

It's usually a good rule of thumb to take your work and life seriously but yourself—and your problems—a bit more lightly. Just remember, if you laugh at yourself before others do, you win.

Keep your optimism laced with laughter

Many of your best memories are laced with laughter, so promise yourself that you'll have more fun in your life and you will become more optimistic. Keep an air of playfulness in everything you do, and take time to laugh and smile daily. After all, when God created Adam and Eve and they ate that apple, he took back the apartment with a view, gave them a baby, and made them work. Then—to keep the whole thing from falling apart—he granted them a sense of humour as a ready sidekick to help them survive.

Final words of advice

Change rarely comes in the form of instant gratification. However, if you're like most people, you want success yesterday. Television has exposed most of

us to more than a million incredibly unrealistic 30- to 60-second solutions. These ads teach us to expect immediate rewards and results, but life teaches us that real solutions take work, persistence, and time.

Be patient but persistent. You don't know which day and which step will put your goals within reach. Imagine that you're making the blows to break through a stone wall to reach your goals. Social reformer Jacob Riis described a century ago what it takes to make change work: "When nothing seems to help, I go and look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock, perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it, but all that had gone before."

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