

TIP OF THE MONTH

Cultivating Optimism

Mary Sherman, LCSW, CEAP, Relationship Specialist



A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”

-Winston Churchill

Faculty & Employee
**ASSISTANCE
PROGRAM**

Many are struggling with the pandemic and feeling more isolated, making it more challenging to stay on the optimistic side. In recognition of National Optimism month this March, FEAP would like to share the benefits of and ways to cultivate an optimistic mindset.

Optimism is expecting a good outcome and having a positive expectation for the future. People think optimism means being Pollyanna, or only seeing the positive. In reality, it is detrimental to deny negative emotions and act like everything is okay. Rather, we need to find healthy ways to express negative emotions like talking to a friend or journaling. Then, following the release of negative emotions, we can return to a positive center.

What Are the Benefits of Optimism?

Optimism positively impacts our mental and physical wellbeing. From the [Greater Good Science Center](#), “According to a new [study](#), one

secret to a long life might be wholly unrelated to what we eat or how much we exercise: our optimism.” The [VeryWellMind](#) website shares additional benefits related to optimism, including:

- Higher quality and longer lasting romantic relationships
- Living longer
- Fewer sick days
- Experiencing more success
- Having higher levels of resiliency

How to Build Optimism

For some, optimism comes easier than for others. We all have a negativity bias in our brain, where we are searching for threats in order to survive. [Rick Hanson, Ph.D](#) explains that negativity is like Velcro (we take it in and hold onto it) whereas positivity is like Teflon (we briefly acknowledge something is nice and then release it).

However, through simple gratitude exercises, we can teach our brain to do for positivity what we naturally do for negativity.

Practices that can amplify the positive emotions in our life helps engender optimism. Here is a simple gratitude practice:

- Note three things you are grateful for in 24 hours and why.
- Recall them at the end of the day.
- Share this with a significant other, friend, children.

What we look for, we will find.
What we pay attention to grows.

If we think about optimism as a mindset, then that can be our filter for what we are looking for, paying attention to, and expecting. Choosing our mindset is completely within our control. When our mind wants to go down another pathway like being anxious, we can help return to a different path and shorten the path with real-time resilience (from the Flourishing Center). We can ask ourselves:

1. "That's not true because..."
2. "Another way of seeing that is..."
3. "The most likely outcome is... and I can..."

We Can Shift Towards Optimism at Any Age

Fortunately, we can shift towards optimism at any age. In the video "[Confessions of a Jewish Mother: How My Son Ruined My Life!](#)," a 91.5-year-old woman talks about how she always finds something to complain about even though she knows has a good life. (If it is raining, she needs more sun; if it is sunny, she needs rain). Her son taught her to add "but I know that I am truly blessed" to the end of each complaint. She irritatedly admits that she is much happier because of it. At any age, we can wire ourselves towards optimism.

We also know that our energy impacts those around us. [UWHealth](#) shares, "our level of happiness impacts the happiness levels of the friends of our friends' friends. Similarly, if you have a friend, relative, or neighbor who lives within a mile and becomes happy, this increases the probability that you will be happy by 25 percent." Again, you do not need to smile and be happy all the time, but if you take some steps to cultivate an optimistic mindset, clearly, there is a high level of benefit for you, and also for those around you.

If you are having difficulty staying in a good place, reach out to FEAP for confidential assistance at 434.243.2643 or on our [website](#).

UVA FACULTY EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

1300 Jefferson Park Avenue, Charlottesville, VA 22908

434.243.2643

uvafeap.com

