



Adventist
Health Ministries
GENERAL CONFERENCE



Seventh-day
Adventist Church

LET'S CELEBRATE **OPTIMISM**

O is for optimism—the joy in life



CELEBRATIONS
LIVING LIFE TO THE FULLEST



Optimism makes the difference.

Thirty-five-year-old Jagdish was living happily in Mumbai with his wife, Ritu, and daughter, Meenu. He was working in an IT company as a software engineer. His wife was also a software engineer. Both husband and wife loved their daughter very much. She was the only child in their family. One day, Jagdish took his daughter to the market with him. The market was so crowded that, unfortunately, he could not hold of his daughter's hand. When he turned to reach for her, to his shock, he could not find her. He did not know what to do. He began shouting his daughter's name, asking everybody in the market if they had seen her. But he could not find her. He went home discouraged, disappointed and broken. When he told his wife, both of them felt hopeless and wept bitterly.

They filed a report at the police station, and they themselves searched for their daughter in many places, day and night, but could not find her. They kept praying to God and had great hope that one day they would find her. Their neighbors consoled them and assured them that they would find her very soon. But three months passed. Still, the police, along with their neighbors and relatives, continued to encourage, motivate and support the family. They were always ready to help with anything they needed. They remained positive. Jagdish left his job to search for his daughter while his wife kept working. After struggling for months, he received a clue about where his daughter was. She had been kidnapped by a group of people involved in human trafficking. With the help of the police, he rescued his daughter.

What kept the family going? Social support, leadership, collaboration, discipline, a sense of humor — all played a vital role. Most important, however, were optimism and hope.





DEFINING OPTIMISM

What is optimism? There are many synonyms and related words: "happiness," "hope," "joyfulness," "a positive attitude," "high spirits," and "cheerfulness," among others. Optimism has been defined as an enduring tendency to expect good personal outcomes in the future.¹ This fits with the Oxford Dictionary definition, which describes optimism as an inclination to "hopefulness and confidence."² Hope and optimism will therefore be used interchangeably in this chapter.

Two people looking out the same window may see different things. The optimist, for example, may see beautiful stars that brighten the night, while the pessimist sees only darkness. Through the eyes of an optimist, the glass is half full; through the eyes of the pessimist, the glass is half empty. Optimism is, indeed, the face of our faith, and it is built on hope and trust in God and a belief that He can work things out for the best. "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28, NIV), and "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).



HOPE WITHOUT HEALING

The optimist may have peace and even joy when things do not turn out the way the person had wanted. In this life, we experience brokenness, sickness, and even death; yet through all this, we may know an equanimity and peace that are beyond human understanding or expectation. By exercising the choice to be optimistic, we can enjoy wholeness even in our human brokenness. (And we are all broken in some way or another, be it physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually.)

Many of us need help making the choice to be optimistic, particularly under difficult circumstances. Pessimists tend to believe that bad events will last a long time, and they often relinquish the idea that situations will improve. The approach of the optimist, on the other hand, is to view a negative event as a temporary setback and to be spurred on to try harder. Sometimes the realistic approach, which takes challenges and problems into account, may be viewed as pessimism; at the same time, a realistic optimist nurtures hope and perseverance, choosing to believe and work toward the improvement of circumstances and situations.



optimism to heal

LAUGHTER IS GOOD MEDICINE

A substantial amount of research demonstrates that hope and optimism are associated with better mental and physical health. Additionally, people with higher levels of optimism have more effective coping mechanisms.³ In the late 1970s, Norman Cousins authored a book entitled *Anatomy of an Illness*.⁴ In it, he described his own experience of suffering a debilitating illness and how, when medications failed to alleviate his pain and discomfort, he decided to watch humorous movies that elicited spontaneous and genuine laughter. To his delight and surprise, he enjoyed physical and emotional improvement and ultimately returned to normal functioning.

Since that time, much research has focused on the positive effects of genuine, relaxing laughter, showing significant benefits to health, including an increased pain tolerance.⁵ Laughter triggers the uptake of endorphins, one of the brain chemicals responsible for increasing feelings of well-being and reducing pain.

We are fearfully and wonderfully made! No wonder the Bible says, "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries the bones" (Proverbs 17:22).

So what may hearty laughter do for our bodies? It can:

- Exercise the lungs.
- Stimulate the circulatory system.
- Increase oxygen intake into the lungs, where it is distributed by the blood to the cells.
- Speed up heart rate, breathing, and circulation.
- Decrease blood pressure.
- Relax the skeletal muscles.

The 20th-century lifestyle study by Belloc and Breslow from the Department of Public Health, in Berkeley, California, reinforce that longevity has a close connection with a happy disposition. Their study involved 6,928 adult residents of Alameda County, and the results showed that those who were generally unhappy had a death rate 57% higher than those who were generally very happy.⁶

It's not always possible to be happy and full of laughter, but a positive attitude can be cultivated — and studies show that a positive, optimistic attitude carries beneficial effects. We can be happy and experience genuine laughter, especially when we completely trust God, knowing that He is in control of our lives no matter what the circumstances may be.



POSITIVE THOUGHTS

Another interesting study was conducted by David McClelland, who showed a group of students a photograph of a couple sitting on a bench by a river. He requested each student to write a story about this couple to gain greater insight into each student's subconscious perceptions and projections.

He found that those who wrote stories depicting a positive outlook, envisioning the couple as enjoying a happy, trusting relationship, helping each other, respecting each other, and sharing warm, loving feelings with each other, demonstrated higher levels of immune antibodies and also reported fewer infectious diseases during the preceding year.

Those who wrote stories depicting a negative outlook, in which the couple were seen to be manipulating, deceiving, or abandoning each other, demonstrated lower levels of immune antibodies and reported experiencing significantly more illnesses during the previous year.⁷







LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

Take the time to consider these questions and apply what you are learning in your life.

1 What devastating event have I experienced in my life that made me feel as if my world had caved in around me? Did I choose to have hope in that situation? What, if anything, gave me that hope and assurance? If something like that happens again, what extra sources of hope can I tap into? Which promises of Scripture will I choose to memorize?

2 In most situations, am I more likely to see the positive aspects or the negatives ones? How can I change my perspective to become more optimistic, even while being realistic? What can I do so that I look for opportunities rather than difficulties?

3 When was the last time I experienced genuine, relaxing laughter? What triggered this event? What choices will put me in this situation more often? How do I make wise decisions in the choice of my friends, what I view on TV, what I read? Do I need to adjust my view of God so that I can be joyful without feeling guilty?

4 How can I nurture positive thoughts and emotions about people and situations? How can I balance the bad news I hear with the good news of the gospel? Do the stories I read or the movies I watch give me confidence that God is in control and working toward the salvation of the world and a better world to come?



SUMMING UP OPTIMISM

The positive effects of hope and optimism impact human life at all ages and in many settings. Optimism significantly influences mental and physical well-being. It promotes robust coping and problem-solving skills. There will be times when we may feel trapped, buried alive by the events and circumstances that befall us. But we are never alone. We can choose to be optimistic, especially as we recall the wonderful promises of Scripture such as Lamentations 3:21-23: "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness." With such assurance, we may celebrate life and enjoy wholeness, even in our present brokenness. Optimism and hope are truly the joy in life!

1 Harold G. Koenig, Michael E. McCullough, and David B. Larson, *Handbook of Religion and Health* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 207.2 The Oxford Compact English Dictionary (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1996), 700.3 Koenig, McCullough, and Larson, 207.4 N. Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979).5 R. I. M. Dunbar, Rebecca Baron, et al., "Social Laughter Is Correlated With an Elevated Pain Threshold, *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 279, no. 1731 (2012), 1161-67.6 L. F. Berkman and S. L. Syme, "Social Networks, Host Resistance, and Mortality: A Nine-Year Follow-Up Study of Alameda County Residents," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 192, no. 2 (1979), 186-204.7 D. C. McClelland, "Motivational Factors in Health and Disease," *American Psychologist* 44, no. 4 (1989), 675-83.



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