



# Be Optimistic

### CHALLENGE

Find 5 positive things about each day.

### Requirements to Complete this WELLNESS CHALLENGE

1. Write down 5 positive things about each day. Check off each day you “look on the bright side” on your monthly Wellness Challenge Calendar.
2. Read “The benefits of being positive” and “When things don’t go well” below.
3. To complete the Challenge, find 5 positive things about your life each day (no duplications!).
4. Keep records of your completed Challenge in case your organization requires documentation.

### Why be optimistic?

Optimism—looking on the bright side, even when things go wrong—has been shown to improve the quality of life. It’s been linked with healthy behaviors such as not smoking and avoiding excessive alcohol consumption. And a healthy lifestyle generally increases your health. Being positive might also improve your longevity.

### The benefits of being positive

A group of researchers looked at the influence optimism has on coronary heart disease<sup>1</sup> and found that a more optimistic outlook in older men dramatically reduced risk of coronary heart disease (CHD). The study examined the effects of an optimistic versus pessimistic way of explaining events on the incidence of heart attack, angina, and fatal CHD among older men.

Study participants with the highest levels of optimism accounted for less than half the number of cases of angina and nonfatal, and fatal heart attacks during the course of the study when compared to pessimistic participants. During the 10-year span of the study, 162 out of 1,306 participants developed CHD.

Of those, 34 of the cases were from optimists and 77 from pessimists; the remaining 51 cases were among participants ranked as having an explanatory style that was neither strongly optimistic nor pessimistic.

Another study involving 180 Catholic nuns (referred to as the Nun Study<sup>2</sup>) found that how nuns viewed life while young strongly correlated with how long they lived. This finding was independent of lifestyle, supporting previous findings regarding the positive connection between optimism and longevity.

The Nun Study began as a longitudinal study of Catholic nuns comparing complex cognitive skills (autobiographies written when they took their vows) with the onset of Alzheimer’s disease. Researchers found they could predict with 85% to 90% accuracy the onset of Alzheimer’s. They also discovered that the nuns who wrote positive comments while in their 20s and early 30s lived as much as 10 years longer than those with neutral or pessimistic outlooks.

In one of the first studies to report the long-term health effects of self-reported outlook, 839 people were surveyed in the 1960s with a personality test and again 30 years later.<sup>3</sup> Mayo Clinic researchers found that optimists reported a higher level of physical and mental functioning than those who didn’t look on the bright side of life. A pessimistic outlook is strongly associated with mortality.

It seems being optimistic improves your chances of living well into your elder years— independent of the healthy behaviors.

### Don’t worry, be happy

Accomplished jazz musician Bobby McFerrin was on to something bigger than a hit song when he composed “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” The attitude he sang about could be the key to health and longevity.

Numerous studies have shown that how you view and cope with life events not only affects how you feel, but also affects your health. Some researchers are suggesting that mental attitude might be just as important a risk factor for certain disease as are age, gender, race, education, smoking status, weight (body mass index), alcohol use, physical activity, cholesterol level, blood pressure, diabetes, and history of heart disease.

Researchers at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston found that being happy seems to protect against stroke. They reached this conclusion after analyzing health data on nearly 2,500 seniors. A study involving nearly 800 Mexican and European Americans (called the San Antonio Longitudinal Study of Aging) found that older adults who feel hopeless about the future are more than twice as likely to die over the next several years as those who feel hopeful.

It appears a positive attitude leads to increased lifespan, whereas depression and a feeling of hopelessness increase your risk of disease and death. These and other studies suggest that “being happy” has a protective affect against stroke, heart disease, autoimmune diseases, and death.

### The laughter factor

Over the past few decades, doctors and other researchers have found evidence that laughter and humor are often effective in assisting pain management and promoting healing—especially in children. Laughter seems to be a factor in increased ability to withstand pain. Laughter-causing situations can range from watching cartoon videos, old “I Love Lucy” or “Abbot and Costello” shows, sharing humorous experiences, making puns, or snappy one-liners.

Laughter appears to be helpful in pain management and healing. Much research remains to be done, but current results points to numerous benefits and no downside. Laughter is not a substitute for medical treatment, but is often useful in conjunction with medical treatment.

### When things don't go well

When negative events happen, **purposefully look for something positive.** If your friend stops calling, your television breaks, and you come down with the flu—lucky you! You now have time to write that novel you've always wanted. If a beloved pet dies, for example, you can mourn the loss, but also reflect on the happy times you shared and smile at the memory, then adopt another from the animal shelter.

Next, **don't accept negative events at face value.** If you don't get the job you wanted, resist the urge to tell yourself you didn't deserve the job anyway. Instead, look for a specific, alterable reason: “Perhaps my interview skills can be sharpened.” Also point out to yourself a couple things that went well: “I did a good job with my resume.” “My spouse sure is supportive.”

Finally, **realize that your value is independent of life events.** Bad things happen to good people all the time. You're not necessarily the cause of all your troubles; you didn't cause the rain to fall; and not everyone in the world will like you.

### References:

1. Kubzansky L et al, *Is the glass half empty or half full? A prospective study of optimism and coronary heart disease in the normative aging study*, *Psychosomatic Medicine*, Vol. 63, No. 6, Nov./Dec. 2001. Available online at: [http://www.psychosomatic.org/press\\_releases/017.html](http://www.psychosomatic.org/press_releases/017.html)
2. Danner D et al, *Positive emotions in early life and longevity: findings from the Nun Study*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 80, No. 5, 2001. Available online at: <http://www.apa.org/journals/psp/psp805804.html>
3. Maruta T et al, *Optimists vs pessimists: survival rate among medical patients over a 30-year period*, *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, 2000. Available online at: <http://www.mayo.edu/proceedings/2000/feb/7502a1.pdf>
4. *RX Laughter: a study designed to understand the biological links between humor and laughing and illness and health in children*, *Pediatric Chronic Pain Program*, UCLA, 2000. Available online at: [http://www.healthcare.ucla.edu/pedspain/rp11\\_rxlaughter.htm](http://www.healthcare.ucla.edu/pedspain/rp11_rxlaughter.htm)





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**CHALLENGE**  
Find 5 positive things about each day.

## Instructions

1. Post this record sheet where you will see it daily (bathroom, kitchen, bedroom, etc.).
2. Make a notation each day you can find 5 unique positive things about your life.
3. At the end of the month, total the number of days you were able to meet your goal. You must meet this goal at least 22 days during the month to complete the Challenge. Then keep up this healthy practice for a lifetime of good health.
4. Enter your completion of the Wellness Challenge on your Health Activity Tracker report for the month. Keep this record for evidence of completion.

MONTH:

WC = Wellness Challenge • ex. min. = exercise minutes

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	Weight & weekly summary
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\_\_\_\_\_ Number of days this month I found 5 positive things about my life  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Number of days this month I got 30+ minutes of physical activity such as brisk walking

Other wellness projects completed this month:

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

