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## The Realistic Optimist

*Is there such a thing as a realistic optimist?*

**There actually is.**



We tend to have a negative stereotype about optimists, as though they are overly positive people who somehow cannot accept the validity of real life concerns or challenges. That isn't exactly the case. In fact, it is not like that all.

*"Optimism is invaluable for a meaningful life. With a firm belief in a positive future you can throw yourself into the service of that which is larger than you are."*

Dr. Martin Seligman

Dr. Martin E. Seligman is the Director of the Penn Positive Psychology Center and Zellerbach Family Professor of Psychology in the Penn Department of Psychology. He is a leading authority in the fields of positive psychology, resilience, learned helplessness, depression, optimism, and pessimism.

In his 2006 book, **Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life**, he elaborates on the notion that one can be both optimistic and realistic. The key is that in imagining some of the potential obstacles, complexities or hardships, individuals can be better prepared to establish true-to-life goals that can lead to greater success.

Defined: **Realistic optimists** tend to believe that they will succeed, but only with effort, planning, and persistence. Rather than imagining an easy path to success they think seriously about the challenges ahead and how to overcome them. This kind of visualization helps them to feel better prepared and more confident.

### Putting this to the test.

In one weight loss study, researchers at NYU asked participants how optimistic they were about reaching their goals. Not surprisingly, those who felt more confident in their eventual success lost an average of 26 lbs., more than those who were doubtful. What is surprising? Those who anticipated a harder struggle also lost more weight than subjects who visualized a harder path. That's right! Dieters who recognized that they were going to have a hard time saying "no" to tempting

indulgences lost around 24 lbs. more than those who did not properly evaluate some of the possible eating slips they would face. Realistic preparations and planning helped. Other studies have uncovered similar results in a variety of situations from job-seeking to looking for love, and even improving sports performance. In every instance, realistic optimists put in more focused effort, which led not only to higher success rates but also to a more resilient mood and life satisfaction.

### Applying Realistic Optimism

In her 2014 book, **Rethinking Positive Thinking**, NYU motivational expert, psychologist, and author, Dr. Gabriel Oettingen, details a step-wise technique that applies the principles of realistic optimism to setting and achieving goals. It's called **WOOP**, short for Wish, Outcome, Obstacles, and Plan. Here's one example of her WOOP model.

**Wish:** Identify an attainable goal that you want to accomplish.

*Example: I want to apply for post-graduate school.*

**Outcome:** Visualize a positive result. How would that make you feel?

*Example: I feel so proud of myself for deciding to pursue the highest level of knowledge in my profession. I can see myself receiving the doctorate.*

**Obstacles:** Ask yourself what kinds of challenges, internal or external that could get in the way of your goal.

*Example: I might lose a lot of my personal time with family and friends and the freedom to do more recreational things.*

**Plan:** Now make a plan for overcoming these obstacles. What will help you deal constructively if those challenges do come?

*Example: I'll make sure to carve out some weekly down time for me and ask my friends and family to be supportive and understanding when I am pulled by my academic commitments.*

Believing that the road to success will be rocky leads to greater success because it forces you to take action. People who are confident that they will succeed, and equally confident that success won't come easily, put in more effort, plan how they'll deal with problems before they arise, and persist longer in the face of difficulty.

At the **Office of Employee Assistance**, we provide guidance on incorporating healthier and more adaptive ways of thinking in order to enhance the quality of your life. Please contact the office and you will be able to consult with an experienced clinician who will listen to your concerns, discuss and explore your options, and work with you to determine a plan of action.