

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Getting Optimistic about Optimism \*

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On February 10th of this year, an unprecedented conference was held in Philadelphia. It was sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation, an organization that tries to develop stronger links between science and religion. Keynoted by the American Psychological Association (APA) President, Martin E. P. Seligman, 200 people heard studies that emphasized optimism, hope and personal control.

Like most people, most psychologists have focused their attention on negative outcomes from negative events. They have rarely explored the strengths that develop from people who survive crises. According to Seligman, many social scientists *"have come to view courage, perseverance and good cheer as illusory, defensive and inauthentic negative traits, while weaknesses like depression, greed and lust are genuine."* Beside exploring the negative results of adversity, we need to become more aware of the positive growth potential involved.

Optimists are often stereotyped as naive, unrealistically idealistic and in a constant state of denying reality. However, research presented at this meeting found them to be relatively prudent, realistic and highly attentive to their health and safety.



ignore them. According to one researcher, *"Optimists are more likely to detect potential problems, make more accurate appraisals."*

In contrast, pessimists are more likely to put themselves in potentially dangerous situations. They are more likely to get sick or to have accidents.

- **Optimism can soften the misfortune of bereavement.** A study was done of 250 people who lost a spouse, child or other loved one to a terminal illness. Sixty-five percent of the mourners found something positive in their loss. For some, it helped them to learn patience. Others developed a new sense of independence and the importance of close personal relationships. (However, widows seemed to cope better than widowers.)

- **Those with strong religious beliefs seem to be more optimistic.** One psychological study divided people into three religious categories — fundamentalist, moderate and liberal. (Fundamentalists spend the most time praying or in other religious activities.) With their faith, fundamentalists seem to have an immunity to depression, because they are less likely to blame themselves for their misfortunes. They are more optimistic than moderates, who are more optimistic than religious liberals.

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**Many people don't appreciate what they have, when they have it.  
However, once it is gone, they mourn what they have lost.**

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Optimism is not only linked to strong religious ties, but it is affected by strong family ties and other lifestyle factors. However, when those close to us frustrate us, it is hard to think of them in positive terms. We want to get rid of the frustration, and often the only solution seems to be severing the ties with the loved one. However, it helps to take a step back and reassess the relationship. Why did you develop the relationship in the first place? What positive aspects still exist? If you weigh the positives against the negatives, you may find out the situation is better than you thought. Your cup can be viewed as *"half full"* rather than *"half empty."*

**"Balance"** seems to be a key concept in life. Rather than just concentrating on the negatives of life, we can balance it out better by emphasizing the positives a little more. Seligman emphasizes *"learned optimism."* He indicates that — with help — people with a pessimistic outlook can master a more positive mindset about themselves and others.

Seligman calls on psychologists to do the same thing. He hopes that — besides repairing people who are psychologically damaged — a *"psychology of hope"* can also be emphasized. The field of psychology can find ways to give lessons in courage, honesty, altruism and hope. Seligman also sees this as a way of preventing the spread of depression and other mental disorders.

*"The positive psychology, the positive social science we envision for the 21st century may not only prevent mental illness, but it may lead to scientific understanding of how to build personal strength and civic virtue — the best things in human life."*

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\* Adapted from Scott Sleek's, "Behavioral researchers call for more study on human strengths," and "Optimism award named after APA's Seligman," [\*The APA Monitor\*](#), April, 1998, page 11.