



## Overcoming Pessimism

Scientists define pessimism as a persistent state in which people tend to perceive events as negative. In the classic liquid-in-a-glass scenario, pessimists are described as those who view the glass as being half empty. Where do you fit relative to the two extremes?

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Optimist</b>	<b>Pessimist</b>
Permanence	Optimists see bad events as temporary. They believe that good events have permanent causes.	Pessimists believe that bad events will be long-lasting. They believe that good events are temporary.
Pervasiveness	Optimists believe that pleasant events and success are normal, and failures are caused by specific events.	Pessimists believe that unhappiness and disappointment are normal, and good things are caused by specific events.
Personalization	Optimists believe that they are usually able to make things turn out well, but sometimes bad things just happen.	Pessimists believe that bad events are their fault, but sometimes things just happen to turn out well.

Although there are some people at each extreme, most people fall somewhere near the middle. Pessimists accuse optimists of ignoring reality, and optimists believe pessimists need to lighten up. Whichever side of the debate you choose, falling somewhere near the middle of the spectrum is healthy and productive. However, serious pessimism can take some of the joy out of life, and extreme pessimism can be debilitating.

There are times in everyone's life when bad events seem to pile up and feel overwhelming. If recent events have caused you to feel discouraged, read the article called "Dealing with Setbacks."

If you believe you are a pessimist, you know that you have a tendency to expect bad things to happen to you, to see them as your fault, and to assume they will be long-lasting. You may be saying things to yourself like:

- I always mess up; I can never do anything right.
- My life is miserable, and it's just getting worse.
- I will never be successful or competent.

This is called negative self-talk. If someone kept criticizing you, would you hang around that person? What if the person criticizing you is yourself? If we are already feeling a bit down or discouraged, the negatives feel more honest than the positives. Self-criticism causes a downward spiral—self-criticism makes us feel down, then the negative statements resonate with our feelings. Once this spiral starts, we tend to dwell on the negative and become more pessimistic.

To regain balance, you need to consciously fight these negative thought patterns. While you are in the middle of a downward spiral, changing your thought patterns may be challenging, but after practicing these steps for a period of time, it will become easier and produce positive results.

Stopping this downward spiral takes effort, courage, and persistence. Here are some helpful steps:

1. First, think of a recent tragic event that you heard about, but that did not touch you personally. Next, compare your life to the lives of those that were devastated in that event and list the positives in your life. You might start with food to eat, a roof over your head, etc. Write down every positive aspect, regardless of how minor it may seem.
2. Now, make a list of the things you have done in your past that turned out well. Include major things (e.g., awards won, good grades earned) as well as smaller ones. List as many as you can—without screening or rejecting any as being too insignificant.
3. Next, make a list of the things that are not going well right now. When you finish, review the list and look for the things that are related. Can you find any relations between the things that are not going well? Group seemingly related items together.
4. Look back over your lists. It should be clear that things do not *always* go wrong. Try to make a rational assessment of where you are right now. Recognizing your tendency to assume the worst; write a balanced, rational summary of your strengths and weaknesses and how you would like these to change. Look at the Optimism/Pessimism chart at the top and make sure your statement is balanced between the two. If you need help with this, talk it over with a friend or a counselor.
5. Speak to yourself kindly. Recognize that you have a tendency to blame yourself when things go wrong. You need to encourage yourself and accept that while bad things do happen, things don't *always* go badly, it is not always your fault, and things can get better. Practice giving yourself words of comfort. To counteract habitual negativity, you will need to repeat encouragement often.

The next step is to set up a daily routine to develop the habit of positive self-talk and balanced evaluation of your successes. It helps to track your progress by writing in a notebook or diary. Select one item from your list of things that are not going well that you want to change. Read "Identifying and Setting Goals" for tips on how to change that part of your life. Each day for the next month:

1. List your daily successes.
2. List your daily mistakes or disappointments.
3. Write encouragement to yourself.

At the end of the month, look back over your entries. You should notice that your thinking has become progressively more optimistic. If this is the case, congratulate yourself! If you do not see progress, ask a counselor for assistance.