

# MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

## Fostering Optimism

Optimists are hopeful and positive. Psychological research demonstrates that optimism promotes health and well-being, and that hope is directly associated with reduced depression, anxiety, and stress. Optimistic individuals tend to be physically and emotionally healthy because they use effective coping strategies and are resilient. After all, a positive outlook helps people accept their circumstances and themselves unconditionally rather than dwelling on the dubious or what they cannot control.

Some people just seem to be more “dispositionally optimistic,” which means that they have inherited positive personality traits that allow them to more easily view the world through an affirming, amicable filter, which we know leads to greater happiness in life. Dispositional pessimism leads to stressful outcomes and increased dissatisfaction in life.

“Explanatory optimism” refers to the way people perceive and interpret events. Those who perceive failure or stressful life events as personal shortcomings are pessimists, while optimists have the cognitive ability to understand the current situation as it is, and work to make beneficial changes.

Optimism can grow whether it is genetically predisposed or nurtured by an individual’s habitual thinking patterns. In addition to better health outcomes, fostering “learned optimism” (Seligman) is directly linked to better academic and extracurricular performance, and resilience over the lifespan.

Optimistic people are not immune to stress and worries. Optimism teaches us how to see that even when things are bad, we can still be hopeful that we can turn things around. Optimism builds resilience, teaches radical acceptance, and motivates through hope.

The following strategies can help develop an optimistic mindset:

### 1) OPTIMISTIC SELF-TALK

Model positive self-talk. Discuss your work and school days with your family – what you liked, what you accomplished, what you learned, what made you feel great and unhappy, and how you are planning to make the most of the next day.

*Optimism is feeling hopeful and confident about the future or the successful outcome of something*



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### 2) EMPATHY

Acknowledge feelings – whatever they are. Feeling heard is the foundation for positive mental health. Simple validating statements like, “I can understand how you feel,” or “I would have felt the same if I were you” models empathy.

### 3) FOCUS ON EFFORT RATHER THAN RESULTS

Cultivating the right attitude. Positive thinkers focus more on the process than the results. Participate in activities without worrying about who wins and who loses. Notice and appreciate the character traits, work ethic and other aspects of learning in the here-and-now. This is how you build determination, integrity, persistence and other valuable lifelong skills.

### 4) RECALLING HAPPIER TIMES

Negative thinking can cause you to believe that bad times never end. Recalling past sad experiences that you were able to overcome encourages introspection and finding hope from within.

### 5) CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

Being able to shift from a negative to positive perspective can inspire optimism or even be the consequence of optimism. Learning to manage expectations by recognizing that it is impossible to always have things the way we want encourages rational reasoning and an awareness that optimism can exist even when you are discouraged.

## The A-B-C-D-E Mindset

Challenge your pessimistic perspective and become a positive thinker by using the A-B-C-D-E mindset model (Seligman):

- A** Adversity or paying attention to any adverse incidents, thoughts, and feelings.
- B** Beliefs and how they are impacted by pessimistic thoughts.
- C** Consequences of negative thoughts and feelings.
- D** Dispute or confronting the negative thoughts and attempting to change them.
- E** Energizing yourself to be more optimistic in the future.





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## De-escalating to Prevent Power Struggles with your Children

In a perfect world, we would avoid getting into power struggles with children from the start. But our world is not perfect, and we are all human. When children and teens become emotionally overwhelmed, frustrated or agitated, they may express their feelings in an aggressive, inconsiderate or disruptive manner. They may make hostile gestures, refuse to comply with directives, yell, throw items, say mean things and more. These situations can quickly turn into power struggles with the adult attempting to exert control and the child digging his or her feet further into the sand. Rarely do these interactions end well for either party. When you feel a power struggle emerging, the best strategy is to de-escalate the situation as soon as you notice what is happening.

Many adults worry that if they disengage from the power struggle it will allow the child to control what he or she is not entitled to control, or that it reinforces negative behavior. However, this assumption is inaccurate. De-escalating and disengaging from a power struggle does not mean that you are allowing the child to "get away with" unacceptable behavior. Instead, it means that you are focusing on helping the child regain emotional control, so they are better able to understand, learn and comply with expectations.

Remember, all behavior is communication. If behavior or emotions are escalating or out of control, there are underlying thoughts and feelings about oneself and the surrounding environment that are prompting them. Responding to those core issues will calm, soothe, and affirm the child, which will create an atmosphere within which the child may function successfully and according to expectations.

Children exhibit extreme emotionality and behave in unexpected or oppositional ways for a reason. Some of the common reasons include:

- Feeling embarrassed, called-out, "stupid" or "dumb" in front of others
- Being told what to do and not having a voice in planning or decision-making that pertains to them or their family
- Having little autonomy or control over what they are permitted to like, do with their time, or believe
- Being teased, bullied, laughed-at or judged
- Being accused of doing something they did not do, thinking something they do not think, being something they do not agree with being, being motivated by something that is not an accurate motivation, or feeling a certain way that they are told is the "wrong" way to feel
- Being expected to do things they do not understand, that are too challenging, or that are unfair
- Being held to rules that are not consistent or not appropriate for their age, maturity or abilities
- Changes to schedules, plans, groups or partners, especially without advance notice, preparation and rationale
- Having property, valued items or activities taken away with or without reason
- Feeling alone, misunderstood, disliked or unappreciated

### Talk to Someone Who Can Help

Sometimes it takes a professional to help you gain perspective and address mental health concerns before they escalate into bigger problems. It's important to invest in your mental health.



## DE-ESCALATION TIPS ...

1. Act calm, even if you are not. Take three deep belly breaths before saying or doing anything.
2. Lower your voice, give personal space, and say, "I'm sorry you're feeling upset."
3. Use humor (appropriately) to lighten the mood.
4. Walk away and return to discuss when you feel composed and sincere.
5. Say, "I see where you are coming from" and give an example that demonstrates that you understand their perspective.
6. Remove the audience and say, "I want to help you."
7. Remind them of something amazing they did or something you appreciate about them.
8. Say, "You can do this" and "I'm willing to help you figure out a solution."
9. Offer to change the way you are doing something.
10. Restate what they are saying and validate their thoughts and experience.
11. Apologize for something you did wrong or the way it was taken.
12. Let them talk without interrupting or correcting.
13. Do not take a personal item or property away, threaten a consequence or say, "Calm down."
14. Ask, "Would it help if \_\_\_?"
15. Provide an "out" – both physically and emotionally by letting them go to another room, walk away, get a drink.
16. Say, "I suspect you didn't mean to..." or "It seems you are feeling \_\_\_\_\_. Let's figure out a better way to express your feelings. What do you think is a more helpful way to express \_\_\_\_\_?"
17. Say, "You're not in trouble. I'm here for you. Talk to me" – and then listen.
18. Say, "When this passes, let's find a time to talk about what happened so you don't feel so bad and can handle the situation next time something similar happens."