

BE AN OPTIMIST

By Leo Cardez

Two inmates looked out beyond the bars,
the pessimist saw the mud,
the optimist saw the stars.

--Unknown

The Optimist Traing Manual:

How to change your outlook and your bit.

Optimism has long been the unheralded secret ingredient to a more productive, happier life. Pro athletes, corporate leaders, elite special forces operators instinctively practice positive thinking in every aspect of their lives. Research has shown a co-relation between high performance and higher levels of optimism. This inclination to anticipate the best possible outcome of actions or events cultivates confidence and persistence because it frames problems merely as opportunities to find solutions.

Now, as inmates, we often say, hey it's easy to be an optimist when you're free, but as a prisoner we have limited resources and recourses. Understandable. But, the real test of optimism isn't when things are going well. We are all happy when things are going our way. The true test is when the shit hits the proverbial fan. But, the beauty of optimism is that it can be learned by anyone at any time -- all you need is a little time, patience, and practice. And the benefits are endless: better cardiovascular health, sleep, and life longevity, just to name a few. Here's a plan you can start today to help build your optimism muscle. This one week primer will jumpstart your new mental

training regiment.

First, let's take a closer look at what optimism really means. It does not mean being naive or even seeing the world with rose colored glasses. At the core of the optimist is the ability to see adversity as temporary, external, malleable, and impersonal. It is not easy to change the way we think, it will take time and effort, but it is very doable. Here's how:

Start your day off right. While you are still laying in bed take a deep belly breath in for five seconds, hold for four seconds, and exhale through your mouth for ten seconds. Smile. Repeat ten times clearing your mind and focusing on your breathing.

Your next ten breaths should focus on things you are grateful for...really try to feel the gratitude in your heart.

Your final ten are for making a clear daily intention. This is not a physical goal, per se, like work-out or eat healthy, but a character goal, like being generous or patient.

Now you are ready to take on the day with the right mindset.

End each day in similar fashion, but instead of wallowing in your mistakes, think about what you learned from them and how you would react differently in the future. Reframing issues as learning opportunities will help your brain learn to flip negative thinking on its head.

Your final ten breaths should be about letting it all go. All your fears, your frustrations, anger, everything must go — you should be envisioning getting a good night's rest and looking forward to kicking ass tomorrow.

That's your primer -- start with that for a month and then slowly begin to integrate the following steps; one per week.

Week 1

Awe yourself. Search out the amazing, cool, and wonderful in the world -- not just your world -- use the entire universe as your canvas. Evolution has programmed our brains to search for negative, i.e. dangerous, situations as a survival mechanism. We must train our brain to also start to notice, recognize, and appreciate positive, neat, incredible things in the world. We can always find something unique to appreciate, if we look hard enough. It can be as simple as a nice, long, hot shower or a picturesque sunrise or even something like the fact that when a Starfish loses an appendage not only does it grow it back, but the appendage grows a whole new Starfish...too cool. Finding these tidbits of wonderful in the world sends a signal to our brain to relax -- that hey, things are good here.

Week 2

Visualize. We must imagine ourselves overcoming adversity. Pro athletes have been using visualization techniques to improve their games for years. It's simple, imagine a tough scenario and then what you would do and how things would work out, like Shaq mentally making free throw shot after free throw shot. Recently, I used visualization to address a difficult cellmate issue, he refused to clean. The pre-planning and strategizing helped me think through the issue and consider possible scenarios and their solutions -- things I would not have been able to think about in the heat of the moment. It worked.

Week 3

Be spontaneous. A pessimist believes everything is stuck the way it is. We need to hijack that thinking by being spontaneous and open to new experiences. We can often find joy in the unexpected and any new experience will bring about new understanding. I had a horrible bed. The mattress was thin and stained, it looked like a murder scene. It wrecked havoc on my back and sleep, but

I had tried to get a new one with no success. I figured I'd have to just suck it up and notch another win for the DOC torture campaign. That Christmas the Warden came around to everyone's cell to wish them a happy holiday, in a moment of spontaneity, I joked that all I wanted for Christmas was a new bed while showing her the decrepit state of my mattress. She laughed and walked away, but later that night an officer delivered a brand new mattress to my cell.

Try to do something spontaneous every day -- get creative. Bonus points if your spontaneity is also generous or helps another-- by helping others you'll often find you help yourself. (See Tip #43)

Week 4

Remember the fond memories. Our brain's chemistry is geared toward remembering the bad things that happen to us as a way to remind us^{not} to repeat our mistakes. For example, the searing memory the first time our hand accidentally touched a hot stove (pun intended). We must hotwire our brain chemistry to imprint positive memories into our psyche. Note when something positive happens and then engage your five senses in that moment. Where are you? How does it look? Smell? Taste? Feel? This exercise will help us create a stronger memory and allow us to recall it more often and easier. For example, the day I received the notice that my stimulus check had been deposited into my trust fund. I paused to allow myself to fully "feel" that joy. I didn't just jump to doing something else. I lingered in that moment, engaging all my senses. I cemented^{it} into my consciousness by gifting some sweets to a few indigent inmates and made a celebratory meal with my celly. I also called my family to celebrate. Now, that is a moment I will not soon forget and everytime I think back I get a hit of endorphins to cheer me up.

Week 5

Use failure as motivation. It is fine, even admirable, to try to be at your best, but don't confuse that with being the best. Being the best at something puts undo and unreal expectations on yourself and sets you up for failure. Instead, when you merely try your best in everything you do you can see failure as a learning opportunity and a way to pump yourself up for the next try. Here's a simple example that I used: I read an article about dental hygiene. It stated the perfect dental maintenance routine included daily brushings after meals and sugared beverages, flossing, and rinsing between cups of coffee. I tried to keep this schedule, but would often fall short for one reason or another. I kept finetuning my approach, bring my toothbrush and toothpaste to work or leaving dental floss next to my bed to remind myself to floss or even using music to brush my teeth for the minimum of: 2 minutes x 4 quadrants per cleaning. I still forget to floss some days, but I've had more perfect oral hygiene maintenance days than ever before and I have that healthy gums and cavity-free teeth to prove it.

Sources: Kristen Dieffenbach, PhD, Director of the Center for Applied Coaching and Sport Science at West Virginia University.

Kimberly S. Reed, author of Optimists Always Win!

Afton Hassett, Psy.D, Clinical psychologist at the University of Michigan

Jack Singer PhD, sports psychologist who works with Olympians and business people.

Michael Gervais, PhD, Performance Psychologist and co-founder of Compete to Create.

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