

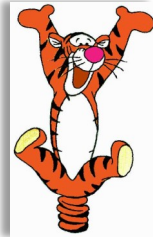
TO YOUR HEALTH

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Tigger to the Rescue

By Maeve Lobo, LICSW



Optimism is part of resilient aging. Over the last three years, since the pandemic began, a great deal of patience has been demanded of the Residents at CWV. Winston Churchill said, *"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."* There has been an abundance of research on how optimism plays a part in our wellbeing and helps us age more successfully. In the face of so much adversity, we are responsible for creating moments of brightness and buoyancy. We have a few things to learn from A.A Milne's character Tigger.

After many years of research, Boston University School of Medicine published a study in 2019 citing optimists live longer. The survey included 69,744 women who were followed for 10 years, and 1,429 men who were tracked for 30 years. The researchers looked at overall health and habits such as smoking, alcohol use and diet. They concluded that healthy lifestyles that include exercise and engaging with other people led to an extended lifespan.

A more recent research published by the Harvard School of Public Health (2022) added that women who were more optimistic lived on average 4.4 years longer than the least optimistic women. The most optimistic of the cohort lived into their nineties. Data from almost 160,000 women was collected as part of the Women's Health Initiative and covered a very diverse group of women. Their ages ranged from 50–79 years old. Interestingly, they observed issues like a healthy lifestyle were only partially responsible for an optimistic



outlook on life. This indicated that there were other factors at play, possibly social connections and purpose in life.

Optimists take control of their health. A study of cardiac rehabilitation patients identified that those individuals most optimistic about their outcomes were also more informed about the risk factors than those who were less optimistic. Another research illustrated that 5 years after a cardiac episode, optimists were still taking vitamins, eating a low fat diet and enrolled in a cardiac rehabilitation program. Studies further reveal that optimists are more likely to seek help when they identify a problem with their health.

Though optimism is a healthy attitude to adopt, sometimes individuals can be irritable about outcomes. A group that is susceptible to unrealistic optimism are smokers. A telephone survey conducted by Rutgers University in 2005 demonstrated that smokers are aware of the risks, but perceived their risk to be lower than fellow smokers. Furthermore those who smoked for a few years did not consider themselves at risk for lung cancer. Unrealistic optimism can be costly and debilitating.

What's your LOT in life?

Most surveys about optimism use the Life Orientation Test. In 1985 two researchers from Miami University came up with the LOT. Michael Scheier and Charles Carver devised a 10 item questionnaire that was scaled from 1-5. The scale has been adopted worldwide and explores the issue of "dispositional optimism" in our lives. Scheier and Carver recognize that environmental factors, learned behaviors and genetics also have a role to play in determining whether individuals are pessimists or optimists. The tool has been revised and is now known as LOT- R. Here are some of the questions that are included in the tool:

- I'm always optimistic about my future.
 - I hardly ever expect things to go my way.
 - I enjoy my friends a lot.
- How do you think you would fare in this questionnaire?

An inventory of coping strategies

There are a number of techniques that help create an optimistic approach to life. A longitudinal research published in 2005 of 165 breast cancer patients illustrated that individuals who tried to alleviate their situation with acceptance, positivity and a sense of humor enhanced their quality of life. Those who dwelt on loss and expressed being unproductive fared significantly worse. The ability to adapt to a situation generally leads to more satisfactory outcomes. Adjusting goals is another theme that promoted optimism.

The guru of the gratitude journal, Martin Seligman, came up with a system titled *Three Good Things*. In its abbreviated form, do the following exercises every night:

1. Think of three good things that happened today.
2. Write them down.
3. Reflect on why they happened.

The good things can be small and uneventful but will help you focus on positivity and how constructive your day has been. Seligman noted that this technique helped lift depression. Work on the exercise for a week and observe the differences in your life.

Practicing Mindfulness is another tool that helps promote optimism. This does not necessarily mean thinking and feeling a certain way. However mindfulness helps you appreciate the present moment. It could involve mundane activities like brushing your teeth to more thoughtful eating and breathing.

Optimism is generally considered a health asset and it helps with our physical and mental wellbeing. It transcends demographics, socio-economic outcomes and culture. Being more optimistic certainly improves the health trajectory of an aging population and contributes to more successful aging. Adopt the Tigger way of life and say goodbye to Eeyore.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4161121/#R94>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1747991/>

<https://local.psy.miami.edu/people/faculty/ccarver/availbale-self-report-instruments/lot-r/>

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15669084/>

<https://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/martin-seligman-psychology/>

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/06/optimism-lengthens-life-study-finds/>

**Super Agers Study Recruiting Participants**

The SuperAgers Family Study aims to identify the inherited and natural factors that protect against human aging and related diseases. The purpose of the study is centered on uncovering ways to improve aging and protect against age-related diseases in humans. The data from this study will be used to create a large biorepository for future researchers about healthy aging. This is a multiyear study led by the American Federation for Aging Research and Albert Einstein College of Medicine, in collaboration with Boston University School of Medicine. Individuals aged 95 or older and their children are eligible to participate.

More info available at: <https://www.superagersstudy.org>

Interested in signing up but need help? Contact the Clinic Social Worker, Maeve Lobo for assistance.

Announcement

We said goodbye to Donny Chanthavong at the end of January. After four years as the Clinic Assistant Donny will be focusing his time on completing his degree in Information Technology at UMASS Lowell. We thank Donny for his years at CWV and wish him the all the best in his future endeavors.