

Just How Full is the Glass? Optimism, Pessimism, and Managing Uncertainty

By Maggie Kapitan, LMFT

*“Debby Downer.” “Negative Nancy.” “Positive Polly.”
“Glass half full/empty kind of person.”*

We assign value to optimistic and pessimistic outlooks, often claiming one to be more “realistic” than the other. Ironically, this value assignment varies from person to person: one may say that optimism fosters unrealistic dreaming, while another may say pessimism fosters a bad attitude. We commonly go on to attach one’s outlook to their personality, viewing it as a fixture of character rather than a preparatory stance to manage uncertainty that shifts depending on circumstance. People often conceptualize optimism and pessimism as existing on opposite ends of a spectrum. This perception of polarity contributes to our judgements of these outlooks. Research regarding the measurement of optimism and pessimism, however, indicates that they are not opposite, rather they are inter-related with the shared goal of anxiety management in the face of uncertainty.[1]

The Functionality of Outlooks

So, what is the point of evaluating how full or empty glass may be? We rely on our outlook, whether it be optimistic or pessimistic, to help us navigate uncertainty and prepare for the various ways a scenario may unfold. Research has shown that the amount of control and influence we perceive ourselves to have greatly influences our outlooks: more influence and control activates optimism while less influence and control activates pessimism.[2] The brain will engage in more activity in one hemisphere than the other in relation to our outlooks as well, with the left hemisphere associated with ignoring negative stimuli and promoting optimism, and the right hemisphere focuses more one negative stimuli promoting pessimism.[3]



How to Make Your Outlook Work Best for You

We know that our outlook, whether it be optimistic or pessimistic, helps us to prepare for what is coming. Optimism serves our preparedness by boosting our confidence in a favorable outcome, strengthening focus on our goals, improving persistence, and providing a better ability to cope and adjust to challenges.[4] While these benefits seemingly indicate optimism serves us best, research indicates that pessimism may also help our need for preparedness by mitigating the impact of disappointment, prompting actions that reduce the likelihood and impact of an undesired outcome, and hastening our recovery period after an unwanted outcome takes place.[5]

However, even in understanding that both may be beneficial in different situations, we have a tendency to judge ourselves and attach moral value onto our outlook. This may look like criticizing ourselves for not looking at the bright side, or, conversely, for feeling foolish when disappointed. Given the potential benefits of both optimism and pessimism, it is most beneficial to allow ourselves the freedom to shift and balance our outlook without self-judgement and prioritize what best serves our ability to prepare and care for ourselves in the face of uncertainty.



Neutral Observation

Start by granting your outlook curiosity. Observe what lens your outlook is taking on: are you noticing yourself taking on optimism or pessimism? Once identified, allow yourself neutrality: challenge any thoughts of self-judgement or criticism with acceptance. Remind yourself that your current outlook is a temporary state and is not a fixed aspect of your personality.

Example: "I am noticing that I have been taking on a more pessimistic outlook. This is just a current stance, and while it may feel uncomfortable, it does not speak to my morals, values, or indicate a set personality type."

Evaluation of Usefulness

After granting yourself acceptance for your outlook, you may then direct your curiosity towards evaluating the current usefulness of that particular lens. How is your outlook helping you feel more prepared to deal with uncertainty? How may it be hindering your preparedness?

Example: "The pessimism I am experiencing is helping me to emotionally prepare for a possibly disappointing outcome. However, it is hindering my ability to think of creative potential solutions."

Informing Next Steps

Upon evaluating the usefulness of your current outlook, ask yourself how this outlook can inform next steps in coping with and preparing in the face of uncertainty. Would creating balance between optimism and pessimism help? If so, how may you start to apply that balance to your outlook?

Example: "My outlook leaning towards pessimism and emotionally preparing for disappointment is telling me that I need to plan how I will ask for support and care for myself if that undesirable outcome occurs. While it is challenging to think about this with optimism, I will give myself a few minutes every day to think of ways to foster more favorable outcomes more creatively."



Conclusion



Whether we see the glass as half full or half empty may not be the most important question we ask ourselves. Instead, we may feel more prepared to cope with uncertainty by granting our outlook neutral and non-judgmental observation and evaluation and using that information to help us best decide our next steps.

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[1] Dember, W. N., Martin, S. H., Hummer, M. K., Howe, S. R., & Melton, R. S. (1989). The measurement of optimism and pessimism. *Current Psychology: Research & Reviews* 8(2).

[2] Hecht, D. (2013). The Neural Basis of Optimism and Pessimism. *Experimental Neurobiology* 22(3).

[3] Id.

[4] Sweeny, K., Carrol, P. J., & Shepperd, J. A. (2006). Is Optimism Always Best? Future Outlooks and Preparedness. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 15(3).

[5] Id.