**Transcript – Optimism & Pessimism**

Good afternoon and welcome to today's Your Health and Wellbeing Hub live session on optimism and pessimism. So today, we're going to think about the relationship between optimism and pessimism, as well as optimistic thinking and pessimistic thinking because they're slightly different. And we're going to talk about how they relate to our overall health and wellbeing.

And I will leave you with a couple of practical exercises to start promoting more optimism and optimistic thinking in your world, should you feel the need. So to get us started, I'd love for you to take a moment to think about whether or not you are an optimist or whether or not you would describe yourself as a pessimist, or perhaps you consider yourself to be both those things, or maybe you call yourself something completely different.

Personally, a real quick personal share. I describe myself as a recovering pessimist. Prior to coming across positive psychology many years ago now I was definitely a pessimist or certainly I had a very pessimistic way of thinking. Because there, there is a difference.

So we're going to start off today by thinking about what optimism actually is.

Optimism is a mental attitude. That's characterized by both hope and confidence, and that hope and confidence is in our personal success and the likelihood of a positive future. Optimists are those who generally tend to expect good things to happen both to them and in life generally, whereas pessimists, who we're going to talk about a bit later on, tend to expect more unfavourable outcomes.

Now, there are two different ways of thinking about optimism. One is as a disposition. So that means, that optimism is considered to be a personality trait. That is something, you know, we're born with, that's your lot. It is what it is. A default setting for life more. And those with this default setting or disposition, all those, as I've mentioned, who expect good things to happen, whereas the pessimists instead predict more unfavourable events.

And there are a number of key characteristics that sorry, whoops, going the wrong way. There are a number of key characteristics that optimist tend to share. So these include that as an optimist, you feel good that things will happen in the future. You expect things to work out for the best you feel like you will probably succeed in, in the face of life's challenges.

You feel that the future looks bright. You think that even good things can come out of negative events.

You see challenges or obstacles as opportunities for growth and to learn you feel gratitude for the good things in your life. You're, you're always, almost always looking for ways to make the most of opportunities. You have a positive attitude about yourself and about others. You accept responsibility for mistakes, but you don't dwell on them or take them personally.

And you don't let one bad experience muddy your expectations for the future. So in general, optimists tend to view hardships as learning experiences or temporary setbacks. Even the most miserable day holds the promise for them that tomorrow will be better. The other way to think about optimism is more as an attributional or explanatory style.

So rather than it being a personality trait or a disposition that we're born with, it's about how we explain the happenings of our lives. Whether what's that's what's happening right now, or what's happened to us in the past or what is likely to happen in the future.

So one of the defining features of optimistic thinking, of this explanatory style, kind of optimists who, you know, have more of that glass half full approach is that negative events are not taken personally. It's not about them and optimistic thinking doesn't attach a permanent, this always happens, say to complete label to events and they don't expand a challenge or an issue to get out of hand and allow it to get bigger than it is. And then it needs to be this optimistic, explanatory style can be cultivated as a mental attitude rather than, than considering something, you know, that somebody else has been gifted with a book. Optimistic thinking explains positive events as having happened because of their own actions or characteristics.

So it comes from them internally. They also see them as evidence that more positive things will happen in the future and in other areas of their lives. Whereas conversely, they see negative events as not being their fault. They also see them as being a one-off isolated event that has nothing to do with other areas of their life and will not impact future events.

So for example, if an optimist gets a promotion, They'll likely believe it's because they're good at their job and they'll receive more benefits and promotions in the future. If they're passed over for a promotion, it's likely because they're having a bad month, because of extenuating circumstances for instance, but they know they'll do better in the future.

And if we take this optimistic thinking approach and practice it consistently in turn, that can help us to become more optimistic in our overall outlook, which will have both a positive impact on our mental health and can reduce the risk of depression as well as leading, to feeling more successful and making healthier choices overall, which I'm going to talk about a bit more in a minute.

What are the benefits? They're more broadly speaking. I've mentioned them briefly. Firstly, better health. There are lots of studies that regularly show the optimist and optimistic thinking leads to maintaining better physical health and pessimists, including a 50% lower risk of cardiovascular disease and greater survival rates.

When fighting illnesses such as cancer. Some studies have also linked to pessimistic explanatory style with higher rates of infectious disease, poor health, and earlier mortality. Greater achievement. The psychologist, Martin Seligman, who is the founding father of positive psychology analysed sports teams.

And he found that the more optimistic teams created more positive synergy and ended up performing better than the pessimistic ones. Another study showed pessimistic or swimmers with pessimistic thinking who were led to believe that they'd done worse than they had were prone to future poor performance.

Whereas optimistic thinking swimmers did not have that vulnerability. Optimistic thinking can also lead to increased resilience. So optimist don't give up as easily as pessimists. And so they're more likely to achieve success because of that. People with an optimistic attitude are more likely to continue to work towards their goals.

Even when they face obstacles, challenges, and setbacks, and it's this type of persistence and ultimately resilience. That means that they're more likely to accomplish the things that they set out to do when it comes to our emotional health and optimistic outlook and optimistic thinking can enhance our emotional.

Research suggests that the process of reframing thought processes in that more optimistic style can be as effective or even more effective than antidepressant medications in the treatment of depression and such improvements also tend to be longer lasting suggesting that they're more than a temporary fix.

People have this training, this type of, you know, essentially it's a cognitive therapy, who, who participate in this training appear to become better, able to effectively handle future setbacks and again foster greater emotional resilience and also lead to increase longevity in a retrospective study of 34 baseball players, American baseball players.

Optimists live significantly longer. Other studies have shown that optimistic breast cancer patients had a better quality of life than the more pessimistic style and those feeling helpless and stress reduction optimistic. Optimistic thing thinking tends to lead to a reduction in stress relative to the more pessimistic or realistic expansionary style, because that fosters a belief in ourselves, our abilities, we expect good things to happen. We see negative events as minor setbacks to be more easily overcome. And we view positive events is evidence of further good things to come. If we have more belief in ourselves, then we'll take healthy risks and therefore create more positive events in, in, in our future.

So before we go on to talk about pessimism, I think it's clear, thus father, you know, an optimistic style of thinking and approach to life is definitely beneficial. But before we move on to talking about pessimism, I just want to take a moment to point out that optimism or, you know, the optimistic, explanatory style isn't always the way forward and in the world. Case scenario, it can lapse into a toxic positivity. So to illustrate that I wanted to share the story of one of my clients. So this particular woman had grown up with parents who were almost pathologically optimistic about everything, which built a culture in her where there wasn't really any space for being real about challenges and difficulties. So as a result, as she was growing up, going through her childhood and her younger adulthood, she didn't really develop any language or behavioural modelling to allow for coping strategies for when things were really, really difficult as they can be in life for all of us at different times.

So she ended up sort of shutting down when challenges arose. And as an adult, she's had to learn very actively and consciously to explore her emotional landscape. And because there wasn't any space to allow that expression and exploration of. You know, feeling low of being worried of themselves and of despair, uncertainty, et cetera. It was very much a, well, never mind, you know, we'll carry on. Everything will get better. It's all fine. Always look on the bright side. Whereas actually sometimes we do need to voice that an event or series of events are really, really difficult and explore both the positive and the negative experience of that event.

So what is pessimism or a pessimistic explanatory style? Well, pessimists tend to think in the opposite way as optimists. I'm sure that's not as a surprise to you. They believe that negative events are caused by, you know, their own mistakes, that own traits. It's very much driven by their internal process.

They believe that one mistake means that more are going to come. That mistakes in other areas of their life are inevitable because essentially that they're the root cause. A pessimistic explanatory style sees positive events as flukes. You know, they're isolated events that are caused by things outside of their control and they probably won't ever happen again. A pessimistic explanatory style sees a promotion as a lucky event. You know, it probably, again, it won't happen again. It's a one-off. They may even worry that they're now going to be under more scrutiny. They're going to have more responsibility. They may not be able to meet the expectations of that new role.

And if they'd been passed over for a promotion, conversely, they would have explained that as probably not being skilled at. So therefore they would expect to be passed over again in the future. And that pessimistic thinking is when we're explaining negative events in a me, always everything explanatory style.

So you take that negative event. Very personally, it's permanent. It's not going to change and it's going to affect everything in life. However, when we're thinking optimistically, we're explaining a negative event in a way, which isn't me. So we're not taking it personally. It's not going to be forever. Um, you know, it can change and it's not going to therefore knock on, have a knock on effect and effect everything.

So as an explanation of that, if you were to fail an exam, for example, pessimists would say, well, it's my fault. You know? I'm probably a bit stupid or they take it personally in the sense of, well, you know, I probably not going to pass the reset. I've may not even have an opportunity to do a reset. I failed that's the end of the matter.

And now that's a permanent feature of my life and they would think about it pervasively. So I failed that exam. So that's the end of my dreams. I'm never going to become the person. I want to be achieve the things I want to achieve. You know, it's fatalistic on the other hand, as you probably gathered by now, an optimist would approach that same negative event in a completely different way.

I fell because the exam questions. They're not taking it personally. It's about the exam and not about them. It's not permanent in, in the fact of, you know, well, I failed this one, but I'll probably pass the next one. If I do some study, it's not pervasive. So although I've had this upsetting news that I failed this exam, today's my birthday. I'm still going to be able to enjoy that. And I'm not going to allow this one event to permeate and ruin everything else going on in my life. So an optimistic explanatory style allows for an event to be contained and for the individual to move on, still enjoy other aspects of their life. And.

Interestingly, when you face a positive event, those two scenarios are reversed. So if you do really, really well as a pessimist, you'll say it's because the exam questions were easy. I was lucky on the day. Oh, you know, I was, I was on form. However, uh, pessimistic thinking would also then be, well, actually, you know, I could still fill the next one.

So they're thinking about it again. It's not, you know, it's nothing to do with them. Whereas an optimist would say, well, you know, I did a really good job. I studied hard it's down to me. I did well. And I passed that exam. I'm good at this subject. And it would be pervasive in the sense of, well, now I can go on and do, you know, as well in my other exams.

So they allow that positivity to affect the rest of what they do. But it might sound like it's all bad news for the pessimists at this stage, but it really isn't. And there are some very clear reasons why it can be good to be pessimistic or to have that pessimistic explanatory style. So pessimists are actually much more risk averse. They're less likely to take part in what you know, would definitely be considered to be risky activities, whether that's drinking, taking drugs, stealing, or, you know, whatever, they are much less likely to get involved in anything which could be considered risky behaviour. They're also much more realistic in terms of measuring what the probability is of. For instance, suffering from a particular illness. So pessimists are much more accurate in terms of gauging what their chances are. Whereas optimists always see themselves as below average risk of everything. Pessimists are also better prepared to deal with difficult events at times because they saw it coming.

You know, maybe they were expecting it. They were waiting for that difficulty to happen. So they may well feel and be more prepared. The difficulty occurs or pessimists when, uh, after the event is the optimist who are much better, the optimistic style of thinking that is much better equipped to help, help rebuild after that difficult event has taken place.

There is also a type of pessimism called defensive pessimism, which is really important for wellbeing, for certain individuals. And that's called defensive pessimism, as I mentioned. So defensive pessimists are people who will anticipate every single difficulty that might occur and they will prepare themselves for it.

They will have thought of a way of handling it and, you know, they will go through the micro detail. So for instance, if we take a job interview, for example, they would make sure they'd risked researched everything about the company. They would know who was going to interview them. They would have worked out more than one route to drive to the site for the interview.

So that if there was an accident, for instance, they could take a different route. They would work out where they were going to park. They would make sure they carried a spare pair of tights in their handbag. In case the tights got landed on the way, um, they would take an umbrella in case it was going to rain.

They probably to keep an umbrella in their car. Basically they will have thought of every possible challenge and difficulty that might occur and prepare themselves for it. And. The reason why defensive pessimists do this is because usually that they're suffers of anxiety. And we know from research that if you try to teach an defensive pessimists to think more optimistically, that wellbeing goes down because it leaves them feeling less well-prepared.

So it's not a bad thing to be a defensive pessimist in, in certain situations. Actually defensive pessimists have been shown in some research to achieve more academically, for instance, because they've thought of every single problem, every single question that might occur as they've revised a topic.

And, you know, going back to my statement, I made at the beginning about being recovering pessimist. I used their strategy unknowingly in my, in the latter part of high school, secondary school education, and my A levels at that time. The A levels that I chose were still very much based around what you did in, you know, a two or three, four hour examination or a couple of those examinations with everything that you did in the lead up, really not counting at all.

So I was very anxious about not being able to recall all the things at the right times I could demonstrate my ability. And so I employed this defensive pessimistic strategy, and I got my teachers to give me every single practice paper that they, you know, that had been out in the last, I don't know, X number of years, I practice those papers so that I had no surprises so that I wasn't faced with a question.

I wouldn't know the answer to so that I could get started and that my stress response wouldn't overwhelm me to prevent me from, from showing my abilities. And that preparation allayed my anxiety very, very well. This is also the strategy that NASA uses when it sends people into space, they literally protocol every single thing that could possibly go wrong because that defensive pessimism.

It allows them to do absolutely everything possible to ensure that people survive because it's still a very risky business. And there are also certain professions that tend to attract more, um, uh, you know, um, pessimists for industry, for instance. So, um, you know, lawyers need to make sure that you've looked through the case, that the ins and outs of the details that you thought of every different scenario, all the questions, you know, all the different trajectories that, that the case could go in and so on so that you can actually defend your client or present the case to.

If you're an air traffic controller, certainly don't want someone who's overly optimistic doing air traffic control. Do you, you don't want somebody to think? Well, you know, if I look up and I think, ah, look, I reckon that plane is going to be able to fit in that gap then it'll all be fine and everyone will land safely.

You want somebody who's looked at the detail, the, my new shirt and assessed all the rest. So there's definitely situations where being more of a pessimistic thinker is a great idea, both for yourself and for other people. So next, I want to talk just briefly about the practicalities of what's called flexible optimum.

So when we, you know, can use an optimistic style, versus when it may be better to use a more pessimistic style and Martin Seligman, who I mentioned before he is the world's leading researcher and authority in the field of optimism, he suggests that we should maintain a flexibility. In our optimistic and pessimistic ways of thinking and to ask ourselves the question in different scenarios.

Well, what would be the cost of failure in this particular situation so that we can then decide whether we are best or whether the situation is best suited to employ that optimistic style or the more pessimistic. So if the cost of failure is high, if there's a real risk to life, a risk to personal health or to a relationship or relationships in that case, that's a high risk situation.

And, it’s going to usually be better to choose a cautious pessimism as we've already, you know, I've already described that can protect us from taking risky actions because the downside of some of those things are really unacceptable. However, if the cost of failure, um, were low. So maybe, you know, the worst case outcome would be some wasted time or efforts, you know, a little bit of loss of face or, you know, a little bit of public embarrassment that in that case, he would recommend taking the optimistic view and acting accordingly, you know, taking a higher level of risk on.

To finish today's session. I want to leave you with a couple of exercises that you can start to use immediately to build, um, that explanatory style. T to build, start building that, that positive, optimistic explanatory style. The first one, and there are, there are a variety, but the first one entails you spending 10 to 15 minutes every day for.

Five days is as a minimum writing about how you would like your life to be when everything has worked out for the best. So you are going to suspend reality such as you know it right now and, write about, you know, best case scenario. What does your life look like? Whilst I said, I want you to suspend reality, we do need to maintain a base in reality. So please stay away from pure fantasy. So, you know, we're not talking about ending up marrying, you know, my case, you know, Chris Hemsworth, I mean, he's married, I'm married, so you know, unlikely to happen for that and many other reasons, so ensure you base it on something, you know, is within your ability, your sphere of influence, and this is about realizing your own potential. And becoming more optimistic about that really being a thing rather than perhaps dismissive. Oh, well, you know, I'll never learn to, let's say you've always wanted to ride a horse. I'll never learn to ride a horse, because I just haven't got time explore that. What would your life look like in order for you to be able to become a competent rider or to get back on, you know, riding a horse or riding a motorbike or whatever it is, you know, something that gives you pleasure.

So that's every day, as I mentioned, for five days, 10 to 15 minutes, you can do it, at a time that suits you. It doesn't matter when it doesn't matter where, and this type of conscious creation of, you know, an optimistic view of your life. Does help to build positive emotion, both in the short term, because it engender as a sense of oh wow.

You know, that's a really lovely feeling to think that might happen and engender hope and leads to increase happiness longer term. And it also leaves you more likely to achieve that particular desire. The other exercise I would encourage you to do, and you can do this as what I call an a for an emergency boost of optimistic thinking, is relatively quick also, it's also quick, you know, 10, 15 minuteswhich I call “what is the best that can happen”.

Now, this is an exercise which also supports the cultivation of resilience and it is a very helpful way to contemplate how something might go. Well, if you know the optimism, isn't your default setting, or he fallen into a rut for whatever reason. So that's a journaling exercise as well. And it's literally sitting down and thinking about something that you have going on, but isn't, you know, you don't feel as going as well as perhaps you would like it to be and to essentially think about, well, what is the best, what is the best thing that could happen here and, and exploring that.

And that is, something I do a lot with my one-to-one clients when they're going through transitions. So, you know, things like moving house, when they're getting stressed about moving house or things aren't quite happening in the way they anticipated changing jobs, or even simply because, you know, you knew from the outset at the beginning, when I asked whether you were an optimist or a pessimist, that you are definitely a glass, half empty kind of a person.

And, it's a great thing to be doing then on a quarterly basis. So I get my clients to do it at the start of the year and then continue on a quarterly basis as a part of your own personal and professional development.

So, if you have any questions then. If you're on here with me live, then you can ask me, I can stop the recording and just a minute. And you can ask me, if you'd like, and if you have any questions watching on replay, then please email me at louise@louisewestra.com. And I will answer those in due course, but thank you for watching and enjoy the rest of your day.