

HEALTHY AGING®

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Aging with Gusto: Looking on the Bright Side

By Dr. Erica Miller

Aging with gusto is a philosophy and choice that people can make to live happier, and often longer, lives. The people who adopt this lifestyle are known as the chronologically gifted. One trait they have in common is a positive attitude and a hopeful outlook on aging and life. The simple truth is that there's no value in dwelling on the past. The past is gone, and the future may never be. What's left is living in the moment and committing to making the most of whatever time is left. In this sense, looking on the bright side is more than just a cliché. It can add years to your life—high-quality years.



What Is Positive Psychology?

Think of it this way: From this point forward, everything you do, or don't do, to better your overall health and prolong life, as well as discover a sense of meaningful purpose for your days, depends on whether you've conditioned yourself to see your glass as half empty or half full.

The field of positive psychology was pioneered in the late 1990s by Martin Seligman. It's defined as the study of the good life or the positive aspects of the human experience that make life worth living. In Seligman's framework, happiness includes three components: the pleasant life, or the Hollywood view of happiness; the good life, a life

focused on personal strengths and states of flow; and the meaningful life, which is a life aimed toward a higher purpose.

Based on his research, Seligman described a concept called the explanatory style. His studies revealed that optimism is not merely something that some people are born with and others are not. Instead, optimism is a learned condition. Although the popular belief might be that some people just wake up naturally bright and cheery while others are destined to be gloomy, that's not true.

What's really going on is that some people have been conditioned, or have conditioned themselves, to wake up believing they have control over their environment, and others have been conditioned to believe just the opposite.

The messages that people send themselves in the face of adversity—that is, the way they cope with or make sense of difficulty and trauma—are what constitute their explanatory style. Those who use a positive explanatory style consistently feel empowered, seeing the bright side and looking for growth opportunities from adversity. They take proactive steps to alleviate their suffering and feel in control of their lives, even when they encounter painful circumstances that truly are beyond their immediate control.

Optimists recognize that adversity is actually a biological need, something that promotes human thriving. If everything in life were easy, our enjoyment would be diminished substantially. Experiencing and overcoming pain are more empowering than avoiding discomfort altogether.

Understanding Stress Factors

Stress is the mental and emotional tension experienced in response to adverse circumstances. It can arise from physical or emotional trauma, or it can derive from concrete circumstances such as having a fender bender on the way to work.

It's important to understand that not all stress is bad. Stress drives us to improve our situations, recover from injuries and illnesses, and protect ourselves against future adversity. But chronic stress can become disordered, and it leads to uncontrolled inflammation, forcing our bodies to turn against themselves.

Chronic stress is a big deal because it takes a physical toll on our bodies. People who are subjected to the same kind of adversity for a long time experience physical symptoms that shorten their lifespans. While relatively short bursts of adversity can help us live longer by stimulating new growth, prolonged adversity has the opposite effect. Unrelieved stress taxes our survival resources beyond the replenishment threshold. It saps the life out of us.

People with a negative explanatory style, or pessimists, tend to experience stress at a much higher rate than those who encounter the same circumstances but use a positive explanatory style to cope with them. That's because learned helplessness trains pessimists to believe that they have no control over their circumstances, so their bodies must adapt to living in a state of perpetual psychological strain.

Optimists, on the other hand, tend to view their adversity as a temporary problem, and their bodies respond by marshaling their energies to help cope with present circumstances until the problem has abated.

Changing Perspectives

The chronologically gifted people's perspective on life is one of hope and determination. They have what psychologists call a growth mindset. This is an attitude of continual self-improvement, always preparing today for a better tomorrow and looking for creative ways to live without limitations—not even the supposed limitations of getting older. Simply put, they look at common problems differently.

For example ...

Problem No. 1: Changing bodies means a loss of beauty and attractiveness. Another perspective is the belief that attractiveness, at any age, goes far beyond outward appearances.

Problem No. 2: Aches and pains can make life difficult. Be realistic about life's challenges without becoming pessimistic about them.

Problem No. 3: For some people, getting older means realizing how many opportunities they've squandered over the years. Living a fulfilled life in the moment is about empowering ourselves to focus on what we can do rather than what we cannot do. There's no time like the present to seize the day and make new memories.

Life Is a Gift

Life is a precious journey and chronologically gifted people seize the day. They discipline themselves to spend time thinking hard about what matters the most to them in the here and now. In that way, they savor all of what their present moments have to offer. And that leads to a profound state of gratitude—sincere thankfulness for the life journeys that have brought them to where they are now, despite and because of the bumps of life along the way.

Longevity all-stars think about life as something for which they can be authentically grateful, treasuring past memories while looking forward to making new ones and savoring the pleasures of today while optimistically preparing for many more years to come.

How To Increase Your Optimism

Suggestion No. 1: Keep a thought journal. Review it weekly. Note whether or not you feel the same way today as you did when you wrote your entries. Circle any words that jump out at you, especially ones that help elucidate whether you're using a positive or negative explanatory style to describe your feelings.

Suggestion No. 2: Inventory the chronic stressors in your life. These include people who create tension in your life, places where you feel tense, and things that stress you out. This exercise demands brutal honesty. The goal isn't to get rid of all the stress in your life. No one can achieve that. You simply want to become more aware of the sources of your stress, and then make decisions about which can be eliminated and which you can do a better job of addressing.

Suggestion No. 3: Smile more often. Laughter is a powerful medicine for the body as well as the soul. "Each time you smile, you throw a little feel-good party for your brain," said psychologist Sarah Stevenson. This means that regardless of whether you consider yourself an optimist or a pessimist, you stand to benefit from finding ways to smile and laugh more often.

Suggestion No. 4: Set goals. Put your goals in writing and make sure you're being specific. Give yourself a time frame for achieving it, and permission to reevaluate that time frame along the way, as well as some concrete terms to measure your progress toward the goal. People who live longer, better lives know that pursuing personal goals regularly is a huge secret to longevity.

About Dr. Erica Miller

*Dr. Erica Miller holds her Ph.D. in clinical psychology and has written extensively on topics of positive psychology, longevity, overcoming challenges, and living life to its fullest. Her most recent book, *Chronologically Gifted: Aging with Gusto*, made her an international bestselling author. For more information, visit www.drericamiller.com.*

