



## POSITIVE EMOTIONS & YOUR HEALTH

### *Developing a Brighter Outlook*

Do you tend to look on the sunny side, or do you see a future filled with dark, stormy skies? A growing body of research suggests that having a positive outlook can benefit your physical health.

Having a positive outlook doesn't mean you never feel negative emotions, such as sadness or anger, says Dr. Barbara L. Fredrickson, a psychologist and expert on emotional wellness at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. "All emotions—whether positive or negative—are adaptive in the right circumstances. The key seems to be finding a balance between the two," she says.

"Positive emotions expand our

awareness and open us up to new ideas, so we can grow and add to our toolkit for survival," Fredrickson explains. "But people need negative emotions to move through difficult situations and respond to them appropriately in the short term. Negative emotions can get us into trouble, though, if they're based on too much rumination about the past or excessive worry about the future, and they're not really related to what's happening in the here and now."

#### A Look at Emotional Wellness

People who are emotionally well, experts say, have fewer negative emotions and are able to bounce back from difficulties faster. This

quality is called resilience. Another sign of emotional wellness is being able to hold onto positive emotions longer and appreciate the good times. Developing a sense of meaning and purpose in life—and focusing on what's important to you—also contributes to emotional wellness.

Research has found a link between an upbeat mental state and improved health, including lower blood pressure, reduced risk for heart disease, healthier weight, better blood sugar levels, and longer life. But many studies can't determine whether positive emotions lead to better health, if being healthy causes positive emotions, or if other factors are involved.



"While earlier research suggests an association between positive emotions and health, it doesn't reveal the underlying mechanisms," says Dr. Richard J. Davidson, a neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "To understand the mechanisms, I think it will be crucial to understand the underlying brain circuits."

Negative emotions, in contrast, can activate a brain region known as the amygdala, which plays a role in fear and anxiety. "We've shown that there are big differences among people in how rapidly or slowly the amygdala recovers following a threat," Davidson says. "Those who recover more slowly may be more at risk for a variety of health conditions compared to those who recover more quickly."

Among those who appear more resilient and better able to hold on to positive emotions are people who've practiced various forms of meditation. In fact, growing evidence suggests that several techniques—including meditation, cognitive therapy (a type of psychotherapy), and self-reflection (thinking about the things you find important)—can help people develop the skills needed to make positive, healthful changes.

"Research points to the importance of certain kinds of training that can alter brain circuits in a way that will promote positive responses," Davidson says. "It's led us to conclude that well-being can be considered as a life skill. If you practice, you can actually get better at it."

Being open to positive change is a key to emotional wellness. "Sometimes people think that emotions just happen, kind of like the weather," Fredrickson says. "But research suggests that we can have some control over which emotions we experience." As mounting research suggests, having a positive mindset might help to improve your physical health as well.

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## Enhance Your Emotional Wellness

### TO DEVELOP A MORE POSITIVE MINDSET:

- » **Remember your good deeds.** Give yourself credit for the good things you do for others each day.
- » **Forgive yourself.** Everyone makes mistakes. Learn from what went wrong, but don't dwell on it.
- » **Spend more time with your friends.** Surround yourself with positive, healthy people.
- » **Explore your beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life.** Think about how to guide your life by the principles that are important to you.
- » **Develop healthy physical habits.** Healthy eating, physical activity, and regular sleep can improve your physical and mental health.

