

READING COMPREHENSION

READING Is pessimism really so bad?

1 Work in pairs. Discuss the questions.

- Do you feel generally positive about the future, generally negative, or neither?
- Do you ever feel annoyed by people who are very positive or very negative? Why? / Why not?

2 Complete the sentences with *optimist*, *pessimist* or *realist*.

- 'The _____ sees difficulty in every opportunity. The _____ sees the opportunity in every difficulty.' – Sir Winston Churchill
- 'The point of living, and of being a/an _____, is to be foolish enough to believe that the best is yet to come.' – Sir Peter Ustinov
- 'Optimism means better than reality; pessimism means worse than reality. I'm a/an _____.' – Margaret Atwood
- 'It's a good idea to borrow money from a/an _____ because they don't expect to get it back.' – Anonymous
- A man interviewing for a job said, 'I'm a/an _____.' The interviewers said, 'Can you give me an example?' The man said, 'When do I start?'

3 Read the article. Then choose the best options to complete the sentences.

- _____ people in the world are realists.
a The vast majority of b Relatively few
- Some psychologists now believe that our _____ may change and adapt, depending on circumstances.
a attitude b personality
- Pessimism leads to a positive outcome _____.
a in no situations b in some situations
- Realism _____ pessimism and optimism.
a offers more benefits b doesn't offer the same than benefits as
- The greatest emotional benefit is likely to come from _____ mindset.
a an appropriate b a realistic

4 Read the article again. Which of the following statements are supported by the article?

- There's a time to give up and to say you've been beaten.
- If you expect great things, great things will come to you.
- If you believe enough, you will get what you want.
- Optimists rarely get a pleasant surprise.
- With the power of positive thinking, there's no limit to what you can achieve.
- You're more likely to get what you want if you don't think too much about what's standing in your way.
- Taking a pessimistic view of a situation may make a positive outcome feel even more positive.

5 Work in pairs. Discuss the questions.

- The article talks about the benefits of optimism and pessimism. Can you think of a time when thinking realistically about a situation is the best approach?
- Can you think of a time when you had a pessimistic outlook and were pleasantly surprised?
- What kinds of things do you think we can feel optimistic about when we look at the future of the world?

VOCABULARY Optimism and pessimism

6 Expressions relating to optimism often use light or brightness as a metaphor and expressions of pessimism often use darkness as a metaphor. Complete these expressions from the article.

- The optimist sees the world through _____.
- The pessimist always sees _____ on the horizon.

7 Match the two parts of the expressions.

The optimist says:

- The glass is
- There's light
- Every cloud has
- Look on the
- a silver lining
- in sight.
- bad can happen, it will.
- half empty.

The pessimist says:

- The glass is
- There's no hope
- If something
- at the end of the tunnel.
- half full.
- bright side.

8 Which expressions from Exercises 6 and 7 could describe the following situations? Sometimes there's more than one possibility.

- I've lost my job, but it was time for me to make a change anyway.
- We had a flat tyre on the way to the airport – of course.
- This project has been incredibly difficult, but I'm really looking forward to handing it over next week.
- My job is going great, but you just never know when things are going to change for the worse.
- I don't like my job, and the promotion I've been offered only means that it will get a lot harder.
- There's absolutely nothing bad about my life.

SPEAKING Talking about financial decisions

9 21st CENTURY OUTCOMES

Work in pairs. Student A turn to page 172, Student B turn to page 183.

Is pessimism really so bad?

There's a simple test to determine whether you're generally an optimist, or a generally a pessimist. When you see this glass of water, if you describe it as half full, you're an optimist, but if you describe it as half empty, you're a pessimist.

And there's a third option: the realist, who sees the water as taking up 50 per cent of the volume of the glass. The truth about realism, though, is that people are rarely completely neutral.

5 Optimists are often seen as the happy, healthy people who cheerfully overcome hardship and always see light at the end of the tunnel. The glass-half-empty crowd, by contrast, are usually thought of as bringing everyone down and maybe even making themselves ill in the process. When
10 you're trying to get a job, no expert would advise that you think negatively. And no one would ever suggest that you'd be better off always looking out for the next dark cloud on the horizon. In fact it's quite the opposite in many cultures, where there can be huge pressure to be optimistic, and to avoid pessimism at all costs.

15 But have we got it wrong? Are there times when a little less optimism and little more pessimism could be helpful?

For decades, psychologists have told us that optimism and pessimism were largely matters of disposition – that
20 most people tended one way or the other, while the self-help industry has been built on helping people work to overcome negativity and train themselves to be more optimistic. However, recent research by Edward Chang, a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan,
25 seems to indicate that the situation is actually far more complex than that. His view is that rather than being a pure optimist or pure pessimist, there are many contexts in which people choose to adopt one or the other mindset depending on the individual situation they're facing, and
30 further, that people often choose the attitude that will lead to the best outcome. It's important to note that the research found that people rarely approach situations as realists, they usually choose to see things either as slightly better than they actually are, or slightly worse. A
35 key conclusion is that pessimism isn't 'bad' and optimism 'good', but rather that they're both functional. Current psychology supports the following example of strategic use of optimism and pessimism.

40 A woman starting a new business knows it won't be easy, though she doesn't know exactly what the challenges will be. If she chooses to be pessimistic and imagine that the business venture will be more difficult than she can handle,

she might decide it's too much trouble and quit without even trying. However, if she decides to be optimistic, she will accept that she will face obstacles, but will also feel
45 confident that she'll find ways to overcome them. Optimism, in this case, would motivate her to start and very likely carry her through the difficulties to success.

After a few successful years, as a result of an economic downturn, the woman is facing the almost certain collapse
50 of her business and needs to decide what to do. If she adopts an optimistic mindset – looking through her rose-coloured glasses – she may imagine that somehow the business will survive, even though all evidence indicates otherwise. She might waste months or even years hoping
55 for the best, only to eventually fail. However, if she takes a pessimistic view and sees the business as already doomed, she will then do what she needs to do to close the business quickly and move on to the next thing. This is as close to success as she could hope to come.

It's important to point out that we aren't simply talking
60 about realism, which has no emotional power. In both starting and finishing the business, the realist would look at the future and say that it's largely unknown, but would have no strong emotional motivation in either direction.
65 However, both optimism and pessimism enhance the view of reality with feelings that can lead us to action in a way that simple realism cannot.

Another way that optimism and pessimism can both
70 serve us well, depending on the circumstances, is in the management of emotions. It's easy to see that optimism can help us see the silver lining to the dark cloud and help us overcome worry and anxiety in difficult situations. What's less often appreciated is the way pessimism can protect us from disappointment by keeping our expectations low. For
75 example, if you were pessimistic about applying for a job you know you might not get, then the blow of not getting the job would be less painful. At the same time, if you got the job, your joy would be even more powerful because of your pessimistic outlook. So in this case, pessimism leads
80 to a more positive outcome, whether you get the job or not.

So next time someone tells you to cheer up, you can make an informed choice about whether optimism or pessimism really is the best way forward.