

Character and Leadership Packet #9

Optimism

Introduction

There are many ways you can make your life better. For example, you can keep your teeth healthy by brushing, flossing and getting check-ups. Exercising and eating right can help keep your body healthy. You can even improve you mind if you're willing to study and learn more. Studying can improve your grades too. And being polite to your classmates can make it easier to get along with them. These are just a few examples of how you can help yourself.



Being an optimistic person can also improve the quality of your life. Having an optimistic outlook will help you feel good about yourself. It is also likely that more people will enjoy being in your company.

Optimists tend to look on the bright side of things. They think positively about life and believe most situations will turn out for the best. You've undoubtedly heard people ask, "Is the glass half full or half empty?" The optimists would say it is half full, the pessimist would say the opposite.

Positive thinking students show their optimism in many ways. For example, if they can't work a math problem they don't just give up on it. Instead they re-work it or ask for help. In their mind they believe they can find the right answer, it just may require time. They don't see failure as an option but only a learning opportunity.

The student who doesn't make the cheerleading squad but keeps practicing so she can make it next year is an optimist. She realizes that blaming others for not being chosen will get her nowhere. Rather she looks at her skills in comparison to those who made the squad and works

hard to make improvements. What makes her an optimist is her positive and realistic point of view.

A positive thinking baseball player who strikes out doesn't become discouraged and quit the team, instead he tells himself, "I'll get a hit the next time, I know now what the pitcher's curve ball looks like." He doesn't think of himself as a failure, but instead as someone who learned from his experience at bat with a particular pitcher. The pessimist would say, "There is no way I can get a hit off this pitcher, he can get me every time with his curve ball."

Optimism and confidence go hand and hand. Confident people know through hard work and persistence that most situations can have good outcomes. For them the glass is always half full. They are even confident enough to turn something negative into something positive or "make lemonade out of lemons."

Their self-confidence doesn't allow them to give in to self-doubt or fear of failure. They are familiar with the power of optimism. Confidence leads to optimism and vice versa.

On the other hand being pessimistic - that is, always assuming the worst - can have negative consequences. Seeing only the negative aspects of any situation can cause you to miss opportunities, neglect problems, and fail to take action that would otherwise improve your life. In fact, studies show that pessimists are more likely to develop chronic illnesses later on in life than optimists. Optimists look for the light at the end of the tunnel while pessimists only dwell on being in the tunnel.

Optimists don't give up easily either. Often life doesn't go in the direction you want it to at first. That doesn't mean that you'll never be successful. It was a good thing that Albert Einstein thought more of himself than his teachers did. They said that he was "mentally slow, unsociable and adrift forever in foolish dreams." He was even expelled from school. Then there was Walt Disney who was fired by a newspaper editor because "he lacked imagination and had no good ideas." As you can see from these two examples determination and optimism can go a long way.

Optimism and Health

More than a hundred studies show that optimism can have a positive affect on one's health. Whether an individual study looked at overall longevity, survival from a disease, heart health, immunity, cancer outcomes or almost any other health issue, it appeared that those who had a more optimistic outlook performed better and had a better outcome than those who were pessimistic.

Researchers also found that people with a more pessimistic attitude were at greater risk for severe depression, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, anxiety, sleeping problems, and problems with social interaction than those who were more optimistic.

Optimism seemed to have fairly consistent benefits for people regardless of demographic factors such as income level or overall health status.

Optimism and Realism

While it is widely recognized that optimism has many benefits you shouldn't be unrealistic about thinking or planning for the best outcomes. For example, it's good to have confidence and to be optimistic about getting a good grade on a test but you also must be realistic. Obviously, being optimistic about a good grade isn't enough to achieve it; you have to be willing to prepare for the test.

The same is true if you apply for a job. You should be hopeful you are hired but you shouldn't be overly hopeful or optimistic if the job you seek requires skills or experiences you don't have. The student who applies for a part-time tellers position at a bank shouldn't be overly optimistic that he or she will be hired if math is a weak subject.

If on the other hand you have prepared yourself for a test or have the skills for a job then being optimistic is realistic. Some people think of themselves as optimistic realists. They have a positive outlook but realize the harder they work at something the more realistic their optimism becomes.

Benefits of Being Optimistic

It can draw people toward you instead of turning them away from you

It is contagious

It can help you reach your goals

It is a confidence booster

It has a positive impact on mental and physical health

It can reduce stress

It can help you focus and complete a task by making you more productive

It can be a motivator

It can make you a better communicator

Steps in Becoming More Optimistic

Let go of the idea that everyone is against you or you only have bad luck.

Don't get stuck in the past. Just because something in the past didn't work out doesn't mean that the future will hold the same for you.

Don't think of yourself as a victim. Instead start thinking of how you can change things in your life. This may mean being honest with yourself and working hard to get what you want.

Have positive thoughts, such as: "This is possible," and "With hard work I know I can accomplish this." Get rid of negative thoughts like, "Things never go right for me," and "No one cares about how I feel."

Have friends that are self-confident and think positively.

Try to focus on the "big picture," don't let a small disappointment turn you into a pessimist.

Have goals. Goals tend to move us in positive directions.

Show appreciation for the positive influences in your life like your family and friends.

Find an optimistic quote or saying and keep it with you and refer to it from time to time.

When faced with a difficult or challenging situation focus on a positive outcome instead of a negative one.

Two Short Stories

Negative Natalie

"There's just no way I'm going to be able to pass the math test coming up tomorrow," Natalie told her friend Taylor. "It's all about statistics, and I get so confused over words like, "mean," "mode," and "median."

Natalie's friends were used to hearing her talk this way. Natalie was one of those people who thought negatively about most things. Last week she just knew that the cold she had was going to turn into pneumonia and just the week before it was all about how Rebecca must be mad at her since she didn't e-mail her back.

Most situations turn out much better than Natalie predicts. She passed her math test, she never got pneumonia nor was Rebecca mad at her. Some of her friends are however, getting tired of

hearing only negative comments come from her. They say that it affects them too, like not winning the magazine drive at school.

It all started when the principal said that the homeroom that sold the most magazine subscriptions in this annual school wide project would get free admission and rides for a day at Great America. The school would also provide the transportation and chaperones for the winning homeroom. This fund raiser was for the purchase of new computers for the library.

There were 30 students in Natalie's homeroom and the teacher divided the students into three teams of 10. Natalie, Rebecca and Taylor headed up the three teams. Each team had a goal of selling 100 subscriptions. Homeroom teacher's talked up the project to the students saying how the fund raiser would mean new computers for the library and a great day of fun for the winning homeroom.

Rebecca suggested to her team that they ask parents for help by having them share the information about the fund raiser with co-workers. Taylor had her team make a presentation to the local Rotary Club. Natalie told her team, "just ask you're parents to buy a couple of subscriptions, there's no need to be asking neighbors or friends, they probably don't want any magazines anyway. Our homeroom has never won this contest before and we probably won't this time."

Rebecca's strategy worked great, they sold 110 subscriptions as parents reached out to friends and colleagues at work. Taylor's team sold a total of 115 thanks to the local Rotary Club and then there was Natalie's team. They only sold 30. Now the student's that were on Rebecca and Taylor's teams are mad at Natalie and her team for not doing their share and especially at Natalie for being so negative about the project. The students in the next room won the contest with 300 subscriptions.

A New Class President

Ryan was one of those people who saw the glass as half full, even when it wasn't. Last year his dad got laid off from work. For nearly six months his dad tried to find work but was unsuccessful. But his dad never gave up, spending many hours every day looking for a lead.

Ryan decided to take a job on the weekends to help out with mounting expenses at home. "Dad, I know you'll find a job soon but in the mean time I would like to help out a little," he said to his dad. His dad was happy that Ryan was willing to help and it inspired him to stay positive in a bad job market. Fortunately, it wasn't long and his dad was back to work. From this experience Ryan learned about the importance of a positive attitude, determination, and providing support to others in need.

These lessons proved valuable to him when he decided to run for class president. He had tough competition with, Todd, the most popular football and baseball player in the school and past class president. Todd's platform was to improve student attendance at football games. He also

campaigned on having the school sponsor more dances, especially after Friday night football games.

Todd spent most of his time campaigning with the students who were involved in athletics and made less than positive comments about students who weren't. Todd was overheard as saying, "If you're not out for a sport then you are doing nothing to give your school a good reputation." Todd didn't address such school problems as litter on school grounds, lack of computers or the outdated books in the library.

Ryan wasn't as well known around school but he did recognize the need for change and was willing to work with students, teachers and administrators to make improvements. His campaign centered on teamwork and having everyone pull together to improve school spirit and to improve the littering problem at the school. He even proposed an idea to have a school wide fund raiser to get new books and laptops for the library.

When asked about the littering problem, Ryan replied, "Yes, I think we have a littering problem in our school but it's nothing that we all can't do something about. If we were to start an ecology club at school we could probably figure out a way to tackle this problem. Our problems are ones that we can overcome, if we all work together."

Ryan held a series of small meetings after school to meet with other interested students in creating a better school. Todd held no meetings and only continued to talk with his friends and other athletes.

It was Ryan's ability to appeal to a wide variety of students and his positive outlook along with the ideas he had to make improvements that let him win the class presidency by a landslide.

Famous Quotes

"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."-- Winston Churchill

"Few things in the world are more powerful than a positive push. A smile. A word of optimism and hope. And you can do it when things are tough."-- Richard M. DeVos

"Pessimism leads to weakness, optimism to power." -- William James

"Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope and confidence."-- Helen Keller

"The optimist sees the rose and not its thorns; the pessimist stares at the thorns, oblivious to the rose."-- Kahill Gilbran

5. Would your friends say you are an optimist or pessimist? Why?

6. Why do people tend to steer clear of people who are overly pessimistic?

7. What are some of the negative consequences of being a pessimist?

8. What does being an optimist have to do with getting a job? Does being optimistic have anything to do with keeping a job? Explain.

9. Should an optimist also be realistic? Why?

10. Describe Natalie. What might a counselor tell her?

Optimism

Questions for Classroom Discussion

These questions are designed to provoke discussion and encourage students to see the value of character and leadership. Teachers are invited to modify, add or delete questions at their discretion but the copyright must remain.

1. What does the word “optimism” mean?
2. Describe someone (without giving his or her name) who is optimistic?
3. Why is optimism important to a friendship? What does the following statement mean? “Friends should bring out the best in each other.”
4. In your opinion do you have a better chance at a job if you are an optimist?
5. Why is being realistic something all optimists must take into consideration?
6. Name several benefits of being optimistic?
7. Would Natalie make a good friend? Explain your answer.
8. How would you describe Todd? Was he really a pessimist?
9. How would you describe Ryan? Why was he able to win the election?
10. Explain the quote by Winston Churchill?
11. Who was Winston Churchill? Does knowing who he is make his quote more meaningful?
12. Why does having goals tend to move us in a more positive direction?
13. Why is it important to have friends that are self-confident and positive thinking?
14. Name three benefits of being an optimist?
15. Name three consequences of being a pessimist?