

Pessimism Kills...Slowly



By *Jamie Wells, M.D.* — November 29, 2016



Credit: Shutterstock [1]

All you have to do currently to encounter an influx of negativity and persistent “what ifs” or anxiety is turn to social media or any news outlet. This pervasive, chronic theme—no matter where you fall on the political spectrum—has been ever present the last 18 or so months throughout the campaign season.

Now that election day has come and gone it appears we keep attaining new thresholds of vitriol.

Life is replete with ups and downs. Negative emotions are a part of the deal. They often make positive experiences more joyful due to the perspective they promote. Some stress can be a salvation to enable us to flee danger, hence, why we have the innate, instinctual biological response of hormone release during those critical moments or brief periods of time.

It is when these caustic states of mind become unrelenting and constant over excessive spans of time that they become pathologic and incite physical harm— beyond mere emotional strife.

The great news is retraining the brain to cope in a more effective, less toxic manner can truly assuage suffering, offer cardiac protection and facilitate more rapid resilience. This is a very personal choice. Some people are buoyed by anger and conflict, while others involute. Knowing who you are is essential to preservation and successful healing.

If children are in the mix, then the motivation to create a peaceful environment is of even greater more urgent import. They feed off of parental fear and anxiety. No one influences them more directly or significantly. Parents possess a powerful, wonderful ability to impact their kids as do the role models and mentors in their sphere. Leading by example, in general, is a very effective strategy in comforting and guiding a child— in particular, during a worrisome stretch.

People process change and disappointment in varied ways — some take longer than others. This election is evidence of that sweeping, profound variability. However, these notable disparities consistently take place throughout the cycle of life albeit while dealing with divorce, death or financial woes, for example.

Whoever moves through uncertain and volatile times more speedily with less pessimism is apparently best served. The physical well-being achieved is now backed by some encouraging data.

An 11-year study in Finland endeavored to expand research beyond the physiologic factors incurring risk of developing coronary heart disease (CHD). Due to the increasing evidence connecting mental health and personality traits to CHD, this group investigated the influence of optimism and pessimism on CHD mortality. The results revealed those who died from CHD were significantly more pessimistic at baseline than others.

The most pessimistic were 2.2-fold more likely to die than the least. Optimism was inconclusive as a risk factor, but the presence or lack of pessimism was deemed a possible, independent vital tool in stratifying CHD-induced mortality risk in the future.

Not smoking, preventing and controlling diabetes, maintaining optimal weight while keeping cholesterol levels and blood pressure down all help reduce your chances. Not being a pessimist won't guarantee avoidance of CHD, but the perpetual stress state it internally creates will certainly adversely influence health and well-being.

This recent work supports the INTERHEART efforts I wrote about in [Don't Go Breaking My Heart - Literally!](#) ^[2] where I detail the consequence of a stress cardiomyopathy as well as the mechanism of action:

INTERHEART performed a large case control, 12,461 person, 52 country-wide study on the significance of anger, vigorous physical exertion and emotional upset in the hour before symptom onset of acute myocardial infarction (aka AMI = a heart attack). It claims a population-attributable risk of 7.7% with strenuous physical activity and 8.5% with anger and emotional upset. The research concludes: "Physical exertion and anger or emotional upset are triggers associated with the first AMI in all regions of the world, in men and women, and in all age groups, with no significant effect modifiers." It further asserts the consequence is additive if both factors are present during that critical time. (1)

Additionally, the "American Heart Association has stated that depression is an independent risk factor for a poor prognosis following an acute coronary syndrome." (2) A [Harvard Health Publication](#) ^[3] extensively discusses the literary canon on optimism's effect which proves a worthwhile read.

As always, more is required for definitive causation, but enough exists to recognize your outlook can have tangible, physical ramifications. It is up to you how you wish to spend the fleeting time

we have here, so maybe the best question is will this trajectory of thinking best serve my longevity and thereby the happiness of my loved ones while enabling me to contribute more meaningfully to bettering the world?

Can you pick out the optimist? Ok, guilty! But, regardless of the impossible or possible, I will always see opportunity over obstacle and can attest this mindset most certainly makes for a more joyful ride.

SOURCES:

(1) Smyth A, O'Donnell M, Lamelas P, Teo K, Rangarajan S, Yusuf S. Physical Activity and Anger or Emotional Upset as Triggers of Acute Myocardial Infarction: The INTERHEART Study. *Circulation*. 2016;134:1059-1067.

(2) Pankalainen, M et al. Pessimism and risk of death from coronary heart disease among middle-aged and older Finns: an eleven-year follow-up study. *BMC Public Health*. (2016)16:1124.

(3) To learn more about chronic stress, refer to my article on stamina by clicking [here](#) [4].

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[3] <http://www.health.harvard.edu/heart-health/optimism-and-your-health>

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