

C'mon, Get Happy

Scientists are making a connection
between optimism and healthiness.

TEXT BY SALLY WADYKA

PERHAPS POLLYANNA had it right all along. Numerous studies over the years have confirmed a link between an upbeat attitude and a healthy body. "The research is very clear that happiness is connected to success in all domains of life, including health," says Caroline Adams Miller, author of *Creating Your Best Life* (Sterling; 2009). Researchers in the past decade or so have found evidence of a link between sunny perspectives and stronger immune systems, better health habits, and longer life spans. A new study is adding fuel to the optimistic fire.

PROOF POSITIVE

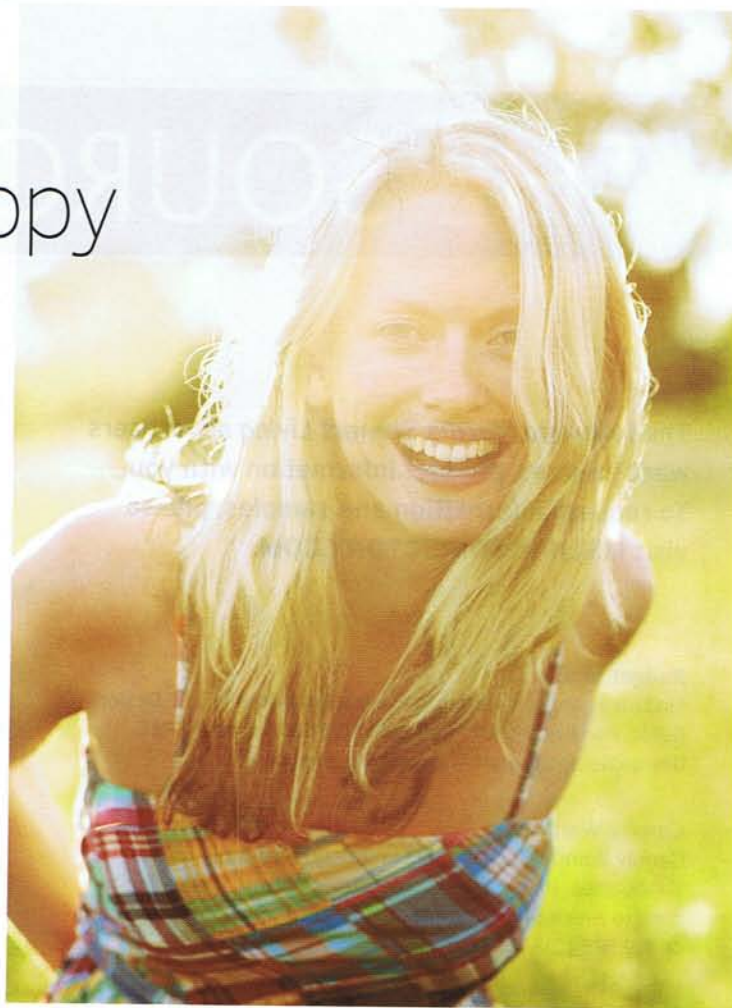
Hilary Tindle, an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh, used surveys from the Women's Health Initiative to look for a link between optimism and a reduced risk of death from heart disease. (The WHI was a long-term federal study that followed women 50 to 79 years old.) In analyzing data gathered over eight years from 97,000

women, Tindle found that the optimists had a 30 percent lower risk of death from heart disease and a 14 percent lower risk of death from any cause than did the pessimists. They were healthier in other ways, too. The pessimists had clusters of health issues, including high blood pressure and diabetes, and they were more likely to smoke.

WHICH CAME FIRST?

Scientists don't say that pessimism causes illness. But the data suggest that something about being pessimistic creates conditions that are conducive to health problems, says Tindle, whose findings were published last year in the journal *Circulation*.

One key question is whether optimism leads to better health habits or better health habits lead to optimism. To determine that, researchers would have to follow people from childhood to adulthood to see if optimistic kids end up making healthier choices or if those who live healthier lives become more optimistic because of it. "But what we can take away from our study is that if you can alter your



➤ **LET THE SUNSHINE IN**
Researchers at Yale University found that people with positive views of aging lived an average of seven and a half years longer than those with negative perspectives.

attitude to become more optimistic or less pessimistic, this may be another thing people can do, like quitting smoking or starting to exercise, to improve their health," Tindle says.

The surveys measured optimism and pessimism levels by asking participants to assess six statements, three worded positively and three worded negatively. For example, "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best." Or, "If something can go wrong for me, it will." The way the respondents rated each allowed the researchers to determine their overall hopefulness for the future. »

CHANGE IS GOOD

Can dark-cloud types really turn into people who see the silver lining? Those in the field of positive psychology certainly think so, and their research supports the idea. Most scientists say that we all have an innate happiness set point, but there are actions we can take to live life at the upper levels of our happiness range.

You can rewire the mind to stop dwelling on negatives and be more hopeful.

"It takes a certain amount of work and grit and the ability to follow through in order to go from a pessimistic person to an optimistic one," Miller says. But the good news is that while optimism exercises (see "A Daily Boost," right) require some commitment, they are relatively easy.

Pessimists look for evidence to support their negative thinking, so in order to work against that, they need to start disputing the gloomy thoughts that pop into their heads. They should ask themselves, "Where is the evidence to support this?" In many cases, they will be surprised to find none.

PRACTICE MAKES PEPPY

One of the most powerful ways to cultivate optimism—and harness its potential health benefits—is to practice gratitude exercises. Every night, think about three things that occurred that day for which you are grateful, and also about why they took place. "It will help you see that good things often happen because of something positive you put out

into the universe," Miller says. "Pessimists tend to think that when good things happen, they are just random events over which they had no control." Gradually, such exercises can help rewire thought processes, so that the mind stops dwelling on negative outcomes and develops new patterns of hopeful thinking. A happy thought, indeed.

A DAILY BOOST

None of the following exercises will turn a pessimist into an optimist overnight. But the techniques can help you shift your perspective over time. Try one or more of these activities every day—or whenever negative thoughts begin to derail a positive mood.

GO TO YOUR HAPPY PLACE Visualize your best possible life 10 years from now. Really imagine yourself in that life—having accomplished what you hoped for, being with loved ones, surrounded by the things that bring you joy. Research has shown that doing this daily can make people happier, and happiness is highly correlated with being optimistic and hopeful.

CUT AND PASTE Gather photos that bring back enjoyable memories or that depict something you're looking forward to (the locale of an upcoming vacation, for example). Stick them on the refrigerator or use them as your computer screen saver, so you see them several times a day.

MAKE A DATE WITH AN OPTIMIST Spend time with your more positive-thinking friends. Good feelings are contagious. (Negative ones are, too, so watch out for doomsayers.)

TUNE IN What you hear and see can have a big effect on your behavior. When your mood needs a boost, seek out songs, books, TV shows, and movies that will leave you feeling good.



Sandwich Thins®

Tuna Nicoise sandwich

Ingredients

- 1 Arnold®/Oroweat® Multi-Grain Sandwich Thins® roll
- 4 oz. canned tuna
- 1 tbsp. light Dijon Vinaigrette
- 1 tbsp. black olives
- ½ c. arugula, loosely packed
- ½ tomato, sliced
- 1 tbsp. hummus
- ½ hard boiled egg, sliced (optional)
- Salt and pepper to taste (optional)

Directions

Remove tuna from can and drain liquid completely. Mix the Dijon Vinaigrette with tuna thoroughly. Place the tuna on the bottom half of Sandwich Thins® roll. Add the sliced black olives, arugula, sliced tomatoes and hummus. Per preference, add the sliced egg and salt and pepper to taste. Finally, place the top half of the Sandwich Thins® roll.

Prep time: 12 minutes.

Serving size: 1 sandwich

Tuna Nicoise sandwich nutritional value

- 290 calories
- 7 grams of fiber
- 32 grams of protein
- 28 grams of carbs
- 6 grams of fat