Are You an Optimist or a Pessimist?

During my first year of college, I sang in our church's college/career choir. In February or March of that year, we went on tour. We were only on the road a few days, and I only remember the specifics of two concerts though I’m sure we did more. Our gigs were all around Portland, Oregon, and culminated at a church in Cannon Beach. It was about a four hour drive between the church in Bellevue, Washington, and our first stop. As we were entering Portland, Gordon, our music minister, yelled up at the driver of our van, “Mark, how are we doing on gas?” Mark paused as he looked down at the gauge. Yelling back he said, “Well, it says half, but I’m not sure if it's half empty or half full.”

We sometimes divide people into those who see the glass (or tank) as "half-full" and those who see it as "half-empty.” Pessimists view their world in terms of deficits and problems, always looking at the negative side of a situation and complaining that their counterparts view the world with "rose colored glasses" or, in some other way, refuse to see how bad things really are. Optimists, on the other hand, look for the good, for possibilities, assuming there will be a solution to whatever problem may come up along the way, without denying the reality of it. Now there are those, maybe quite a few, who don’t seem to fit neatly in either group, judging situations as they come up and projecting a realistic positive or negative outcome on it based on the available information. We’ll call them optimists too.

There are characteristics, other than a predicted outcome, associated with optimism and pessimism that we don’t necessarily think of or may even be surprised to hear. Martin Seligman lists these traits in his book, Learned Optimism. According to him, the core of pessimism is a position of helplessness – the position taken in which there is nothing that can be done to affect a change in a situation’s outcome, which is inevitably bad. Likely, you wouldn't be surprised to hear that many of the pessimists’ “I told you so’s” end up being self-fulfilling prophesies or, at least, made worse by actions taken or decisions made based on their negativity. Pessimists tend to give up more easily than optimists and get depressed more often. Seligman reports that optimists do better in school, at work and in sports. They get elected more often than pessimists, are healthier, and may even live longer. While pessimists assume a helplessness position, optimists look for opportunity and act within their sphere of control.

For the Christian, there is every reason to adopt the outlook of an optimist. In fact, optimism is the Biblical position to take. The apostle Paul demonstrates his optimism in his second letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 4 beginning at verse 16, he writes: So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (English Standard Version)

A couple of chapters later, Paul lists his personal "light momentary afflictions". “…with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” 2 Corinthians 11: 23b-27

Paul acknowledges his situation and doesn’t deny reality; he views life and life’s troubles from an eternal perspective. While helplessness is associated with pessimism, choicefulness and self-control is characteristic of optimism. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul lists self-control among the fruits of the
Spirit. Some older translations use the word “temperance.” The emphasis here is that the Spirit-filled Christian can choose to resist the lusts of the flesh – exercise self-control.

The helplessness of the pessimist leads to giving in (or giving up) to external pressures – continuing in addictive behavior, procrastinating instead of studying for an exam, spending money frivolously instead of keeping to a budget. Acknowledging that one can act in a way that influences outcome, it is part of being an optimist. Victor Frankl, in his classic book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, observed that hope was essential for surviving the Nazi prison camps. “The prisoner who had lost faith in the future – his future – was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay. Usually, this happened quite suddenly…” (p. 74)

I’m not proposing a “name it and claim it” mentality, or suggesting that anyone ignore the reality of any situation. Ultimately though, the Christian wins. Eternity, separated from sin and present with God, is what waits for us. Really, what else matters? I don’t know if Frankl ever turned to Christ. He did face a situation in which everything was taken from him. He was reduced to a number; he was separated from his family, humiliated, beaten, and confronted with the likelihood of death at anytime. In spite of this, he declared to his fellow prisoners, “I (have) no intention of losing hope and giving up.” (p. 82)

So, how does a pessimist change? The first step is probably the hardest. It’s acknowledging that something can be done about it. It’s giving up on helplessness, and choosing to take control over one’s life. The next step is to work through a course of cognitive therapy (CT). That may mean seeking help from a therapist who practices CT. I’d never discourage this move, however, it may not be necessary in all cases.

Cognitive therapy involves analyzing one’s responses to the events of life that ultimately result in an emotional consequence, and then changing one’s perspective to one that is more realistic and useful. The formula is as easy as ABC. “A” stands for an antecedent event. It’s what happens out there in the world that results in a “C” – an emotional consequence. “B” is the belief one has in the “A” that results in the “C”. After this is all laid out, you work through and, if necessary, make changes to one’s belief about the event that’s being addressed. This isn’t the place to go into all the details. Reading Seligman’s book is a good start, and it deals specifically with optimism. I have many of my clients go through Greenberger and Padesky’s, *Mind over Mood*, a manual that can be used as an adjunct to counseling or as a self-help workbook. This book deals mostly with depression and anxiety, which can be associated with pessimism. It deals more specifically with the mechanics of CT, than Seligman’s text, which may be beneficial if you are working through it by yourself.

Pessimists usually have reasons for taking on a negative outlook. One of the more popular is, “I don’t want to be disappointed when it turns out bad” or something like that. The thing is, optimism is Biblical, it yields better, more positive results, and is healthier for you. Consider your outlook, do you tend toward being a “half-full” or a ”half-empty” kind of person?

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Dr. Kyle Pontius is a licensed psychologist and the Clinic Director at the Meier Clinics in Laguna Hills, California. He holds a PhD from Alliant International University and is a graduate of Talbot Theological Seminary, Biola University. Dr. Pontius lives in Rancho Santa Margarita, California, with his wife, two sons and two cats. He is actively involved at Saddleback Church, and enjoys art and music.