

Productive Thinking 101

How an optimistic mindset can help your thoughts be accurate and productive

How you think has a direct impact on how you perform, especially when you're facing adversity. Optimistic thinking can positively impact your performance, well-being, readiness, and resilience. Optimism is often misunderstood as only focusing on the positives and ignoring the reality of the situation. In fact, optimistic thinking helps you to recognize what's truly happening, maintain a fighting spirit to persevere, and find a way to turn an obstacle into an advantage.

Optimism self-check

How optimistic or pessimistic your thinking is can shift based on the situation, your mood, or the other people involved. Use this self-check reflection to be more aware of how you approach a current adversity.

After each question, think about how a pessimistic thinker (P) might respond vs. an optimistic thinker (O). Which answers hit closer to home in this moment? Keep in mind this isn't an assessment but an opportunity to help you reflect on your approach to this adversity, evaluate if it's more aligned with optimistic thinking or pessimistic thinking, and decide where you might want to change course of action.

1. What are your thoughts?

- P** My thoughts are consumed with past negative events or potential worst-case outcomes.
- O** My thoughts are focused on where I have control in this situation and how I can take action to improve things.

2. What are you saying to others?

- P** The majority of my conversations involve complaining about things outside of my control.
- O** Most of my conversations are focused on problem-solving and finding potential opportunities.

3. How are you spending your time?

- P** I'm avoiding this struggle by procrastinating or distracting myself with unproductive behaviors (for example, social media, drinking, shopping, etc.).
- O** I'm taking on this struggle by developing a plan of attack.

4. How are you persisting through this struggle?

- P** If it gets hard, I'll likely give up.
- O** I'm willing to push through adversity to find a way to grow.

5. How are you approaching others during this struggle?

- P** I'm isolating myself from others and/or unintentionally lashing out.
- O** I'm reaching out to others who can help and support me.

6. How do you see yourself in this struggle?

- P** I'm a victim who lacks the ability to overcome an overpowering threat.
- O** I'm a warrior with the strengths needed to overcome a tough challenge.

7. How are your emotions impacting your ability to navigate this struggle?

- P** I'm overwhelmed with negative feelings that are blocking productive action.
- O** I'm finding ways to generate moments of curiosity, gratitude, peace, or humor despite my struggle to stay energized.

8. How is this struggle affecting the rest of your life (for example, other relationships, work, hobbies, sleep, diet, etc.)?

- P** This struggle is negatively impacting many parts of my life.
- O** I'm finding ways to excel and find joy in other aspects of my life.

9. Where are you focusing your attention?

- P** My focus is on the constraints that are limiting me in this struggle.
- O** My focus is on those resources that can help me.

10. How is this struggle impacting your view of the future?

- P** I have little hope the future will be better.
- O** I'm hopeful and excited for the future.

Build optimism by tuning into your thoughts, reengaging your focus, and reframing your thinking. Use the worksheet below to help you think more accurately and productively. When optimistic thinkers find themselves stuck on a broken record of unproductive thinking, they reframe their thoughts to drive more productive emotions and reactions. *Reframing isn't just about turning the negative thinking into positive, but rather about becoming more accurate and productive in your thinking.* Try these steps to shift into productive thinking:

- 1. Tune in.** To become aware of how you think, you need to listen to how you talk to yourself. A good time to tune in is when your thoughts are generating feelings or behaviors you know aren't productive in that moment.
- 2. Take a tactical pause.** Sometimes distancing yourself from your thoughts is all you need to examine them more objectively. Take a deep breath and write down what you're thinking. Then ask yourself, "What are these thoughts leading me to feel and do (or not do)?"
- 3. Reflect and re-engage.** Just noticing and naming how you're thinking and feeling can be enough. But if your thinking isn't working for you, try to generate some alternative thoughts. Here are some reframes and strategic questions you can try.

<p>Hunt for opportunities in the face of threats. You're probably very good at spotting threats because it's what you've been taught to do in the military. This ability has helped our species survive. But in addition to acknowledging threats, we can often look for opportunities in the same situation.</p>	
<p>What are some of the good things I might learn about myself or others through this challenge?</p> <p>How are circumstances providing me with new pathways to do or experience things I wasn't able to before?</p> <p>What's the best way to view this?</p>	
<p>Grab control amid the chaos. In volatile and uncertain circumstances, focusing on things you can control can help bring your heart rate back to normal after it's been high.</p>	
<p>Where do I have control to make things better?</p> <p>What's one small thing I might be missing that I have control or influence over right now?</p> <p>What can I do right now to create positive change?</p>	
<p>Make the shift from "me" to "we." In the midst of challenging times, it's easy to get stuck in a victim mentality and focus on your losses—or how circumstances might negatively impact you. Take a breath and look outward instead.</p>	
<p>Who else is struggling?</p> <p>How can I help?</p> <p>What can we do to overcome these adversities together?"</p>	
<p>Focus on where you can do good. When you experience heartbreak, failure, or frustration in one area, it can bleed into other parts of your life and affect your overall performance. Optimistic thinkers are deliberate in not letting one bad situation pollute the other aspects of their life. Life involves more than one mission at a time. Take a deliberate approach to reset and refocus when changing missions.</p>	
<p>What must I accept?</p> <p>How can I keep one issue from affecting other parts of my life?</p> <p>How can I take productive action now?</p>	

- 4. Do an after-action review.** If you tried to reframe your thinking, what changes did you notice? Did the process help you feel different emotions, calm you down physically, or lead to more productive behaviors? Did it help you feel less stuck?