

## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### The Power of Positive Thinking

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **In this BOOST, we take a look at how positive thinking (brain performance) can improve your health outcomes.***

The Monty Python tune “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” may have gotten a laugh in the 1979 film “[Life of Brian](#),” but the effects of positive thinking are no joke when it comes to our health and well-being.

Over the years, numerous studies have shown an optimistic outlook helps us cope with disease, recover from surgery, and lead to better physical and brain health, and a longer life. One study from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that women who were optimistic had a significantly reduced risk of dying from several major causes of death — including cancer, heart disease, stroke, and lung disease.

But many of us are finding it hard to be optimistic these days. Between the pandemic, social unrest, and political discord, there seems to be multiple distractions to positives on which to focus. In a recent [Harvard Gazette](#) article, Laura Kubzansky, PhD, professor of social and behavioral sciences at Harvard’s T.H. Chan School of Public Health, suggests trying to keep things in perspective. Instead of focusing on the negative, Dr. Kubzansky recommends looking for the silver linings — the hopeful things — in our lives.

When we are optimistic, we also tend to make healthier decisions. We find it easier to stay focused on larger goals and better health behaviors such as exercise, healthy diet, and not smoking. Researchers are continuing to look beyond the behavioral aspects of optimism to investigate potential biological pathways that link optimism to better health.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Research is ongoing to clarify the link between optimism and physical and brain health, but studies show that a positive outlook definitely has an impact on your health, including these conditions.

- **Brain health.** Optimism reduces stress and promotes the production of dopamine, the neurotransmitter that plays a role in feeling pleasure. Studies have also shown that optimism can help prevent anxiety and depression.
- **Heart disease.** Studies show that optimistic cardiac patients are less likely to be readmitted to the hospital following bypass surgery and angioplasty patients with a positive outlook were less likely to require repeat angioplasties, have a heart attack, or need bypass surgery. Another study evaluated more than 1,000 men with an average age of 61 for an optimistic or pessimistic style as well as for blood pressure, cholesterol, obesity, smoking, alcohol use, and family history of heart disease. None of the men had been diagnosed with coronary artery disease when the study began. Over the next 10 years, the most pessimistic men were more than twice as likely to develop heart disease than the most optimistic men, even after taking other risk factors into account.
- **Blood pressure.** An American study of 2,564 men and women who were 65 and older used a positive emotion summary scale to evaluate participants, in addition to blood pressure, height, weight, age, marital status, alcohol use, diabetes, and medication. Even after taking these other factors into account, people with positive emotions had lower blood pressures than those with a negative outlook.
- **Infections.** Exploring the link between emotions and viral infections of the respiratory tract, scientists found that people who displayed a positive personality style were less likely to develop viral symptoms when exposed to an infection.
- **Overall health.** People who have a positive outlook are much more likely to stay healthy and enjoy independent living than their less cheerful peers, and those results hold up for the long haul. A comprehensive medical evaluation from the 1960s showed that over a 30-year period, optimism was linked to a better outcome of physical and mental function and health.
- **Lifespan.** If optimism actually improves health, does it also boost longevity? According to a number of studies, the answer is yes. One study looked at nearly 7,000 students who took a comprehensive personality test when they entered the University of North Carolina in the mid-1960s. Over the next 40 years, 476 of the people died from a variety of causes, but the most pessimistic individuals had a 42 percent higher rate of death than those who were considered most optimistic.
- In addition to having a positive attitude, **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:
  - Stress resilience
  - Nutrition
  - Physical activity
  - Sleep
  - Social connection

- Emotional wellbeing
- Meaning and Purpose
- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

**About the Brain Health Initiative ([www.brainhealthinitiative.org](http://www.brainhealthinitiative.org))**

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference***. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).