
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Optimists vs. Pessimists



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Sam

And I'm Sam.

Neil

We often hear phrases such as, 'dream big' or, 'reach for the stars' which reflect an optimistic view of life. Are you an optimist, Sam?

Sam

I hope so! I try to see the positive side of life, even when something bad happens.

Neil

It sounds like you're a **glass-half-full person** – someone who always thinks that good things will happen.

Sam

How about you, Neil? Are you optimistic?

Neil

Look, things go wrong all the time - that's a fact of life. Call me a pessimist if you like but I'm just being realistic.

Sam

Hmm, it sounds like Neil is more of a glass-half-empty person, but the truth is that the age-old debate between optimism and pessimism is more complex than we think.

Neil

Yes, whether you're a sunny optimist or a gloomy pessimist may be determined more by your birthplace and your age than your attitude, as we'll be finding out in this programme.

Sam

Great. I've got a good feeling about this, Neil!

Neil

But first, as usual, I have a question for you, Sam. Psychologists define optimism as an attitude which overestimates the chances of good things happening to you, while underestimating the chances of bad things occurring. So, what proportion of the British population, do you think, describe themselves as optimistic? Is it:

- a) 20 percent?
- b) 50 percent? or,
- c) 80 percent?

Sam

I'll choose the largest – 80 percent... but then, I'm optimistic so I would say that!

Neil

OK, Sam. We'll find out if your optimistic answer is the correct one later in the programme. Someone who probably wouldn't agree with you, though, is BBC World Service listener, Hannah. Hannah grew up in Germany before moving to the United States. She thinks Americans tend to be more optimistic than people back home in Germany, as she told BBC World Service programme, CrowdScience:

Hannah

I think the stereotypical perception of Germans is that we're quite pessimistic and that kind of tends to come across as being a bit of a **Debbie Downer**, when in actuality, Germans just tend to be avid planners for all eventual negative eventualities as well... so that's kind of us being pessimistic but actually being cautious, as opposed to for example, what I've notice in America that a lot of people tend to be **hyper**-optimistic. I've always admired how Americans tend to be able to **sugarcoat** everything.

Sam

As a stereotypical pessimist, Hannah sometimes feels like a **Debbie Downer**. This expression is American slang for someone who makes others feel bad by focussing on the depressing aspects of things.

Neil

Americans, on the other hand, are typically seen as optimists who tend to **sugarcoat** things – make things seem better than they really are.

Sam

According to Hannah, many Americans are **hyper**-optimistic. She uses the prefix **hyper** to say that there is *too much* of a certain quality. Hyper-sensitive people are *too* sensitive; a hyper-optimist is *too* optimistic.

Neil

Besides your country of birth, age is another consideration in the optimism debate. When we're young we have our whole life ahead of us, and it's easier to optimistically believe that everything's going to be alright.

Sam

The belief that everything's going to be fine is called 'the optimism bias'. It isn't fixed but changes as we age - something neuroscientist, Professor Tali Sharot, explained to BBC World Service programme, CrowdScience:

Tali Sharot

So it's quite high in kids and teenagers – they think, 'Oh, everything's going to be fine'... and then it goes down, down, down and it hits **rock bottom** in your midlife at which point the optimism bias is relatively small, and then it starts climbing up again and it's quite high in the elderly population, and that goes absolutely against our view of the **grumpy old man**, or woman.

Neil

After starting out high in children, the optimism bias hits **rock bottom** – the lowest possible level – in middle age, often because of work pressures, family responsibilities or caring for elderly parents.

Sam

But optimism seems to increase again as we get older. This is surprising as it goes against the image we have of the **grumpy old man** – a phrase to describe someone who complains a lot, is moody and gets easily annoyed. Optimistic women, meanwhile, can look forward to longer, healthier lives.

Neil

Good news for you then, Sam! But I'm sticking with my pessimism. If I anticipate things going wrong I don't get disappointed when they do!

Sam

That's actually a fairly positive way of looking at things, Neil, but I'm not sure if most people would agree with you – or maybe they would... It depends on the answer to your question...

Neil

Right. I asked Sam what proportion of British people describe themselves as optimistic.

Sam

And optimistically, I said it was c) 80 percent.

Neil

Which was... the correct answer!

Sam

Of course it was. Whether you expect good or bad things to happen to you, you're probably right. So why not focus on the sunny side of life, Neil? That way, you've got nothing to lose!

Neil

OK, let's recap the vocabulary from this programme, Sam. You're certainly a **glass-half-full person** – someone with an optimistic attitude to life.

Sam

And you're something of a **Debbie Downer** - American slang for someone who brings everyone down by talking about the negative side of things.

Neil

If you **sugarcoat** something, you make it appear more positive than it really is.

Sam

The prefix **hyper** is used before an adjective to show having too much of that quality, for example hypercritical means being too critical.

Neil

If something hits **rock bottom** it reaches its lowest possible level.

Sam

And finally, the phrase **grumpy old man** can be used to describe someone who always complains, is intolerant and gets annoyed easily... a bit like Neil!

Neil

Unfortunately our six minutes are up, but join us again soon for more trending topics and useful vocabulary here at 6 Minute English. Goodbye for now!

Sam

Bye!

VOCABULARY

glass-half-full person

someone with an optimistic attitude who tends to focus on the positive side of life

Debbie Downer

(US slang) someone who makes others feel bad by focussing on the bad or depressing side of things

sugarcoat

to make something seem better than it really is

hyper-

(prefix) having too much of a quality eg. hyperactive, hypersensitive

rock bottom

lowest possible level

grumpy old man

describes someone who complains a lot, is moody and intolerant, and gets easily annoyed